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ASTRO

Adventures

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Tales of Scientifiction, including
"Beyond the Worlds We Know"
by Lin Carter

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... Tales of Scientifiction

ASTRO- Adventures

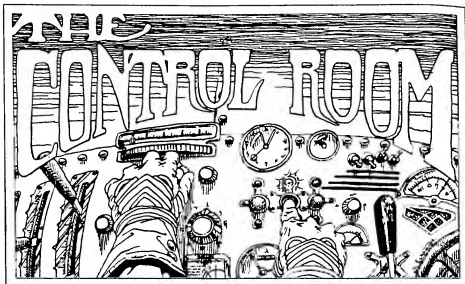
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Number Five

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What's that? Y'mean another one o' these freakin' live specimens from Io has gotten out? The one with all the eyes? Hmmm . . . they're invulnerable to lasers! Got it! Give the critter a copy of Astro-Adventures #5! That's sure to occupy him till we can think of something! I mean, how can he fail to be entertained by a list of contents like this!?

Veteran space voyager Raymond Z. Gallun joins the crew this issue with "The Gentle Anger." This black-hole buccaneer has been producing pulsating pieces of ether-epic for decades in pulps like Astounding Science Fiction, Planet Stories, Super Science Fiction, and Marvel Science Fiction, and we are pleased to welcome him home where he belongs: to Astro-Adventures, the last real "scientifiction" mag!

Tales from the Time-Warp presents a neglected pulp classic, Leigh Brackett's "Dragon-Queen of Jupiter," excavated from the extraterrestrial caves of Planet Stories, Summer 1941, with the help of our

reprint editor Dan Gobbett.

The late Lin Carter had, as you know, created a brand-new series character for Astro-Adventures, Star Pirate, an amalgam of the best of Captain Future, Hawk Carse, and Northwest Smith. Star Pirate and his trusty crew of Phath the Venusian and Dr. Zoar of Mars set out for adventure beyond the rim of inhabited space in "Beyond the Worlds We Know," a saga continued in our next issue.

Charles Garofalo rounds out the issue with a tale of eeriness in the ether, "The Fifth Spacesuit," a space-spinetinger.

You're kidding! It's finished the whole issue already? Yeah, with all those eyes, I guess so. Gotta run, spacehounds! It's going to be a mighty jumpin' joint around here till we can put the next issue together: I'm afraid we've spoiled this monster! Nothing less than Astro-Adventures will satisfy him!

Captain Astro

THE GENTLE ANGER

by Raymond Z. Gallun

Mark and I were born to fury. Ma used to say that we began clubbing each other with our rattles, like young Neanderthals, when we were twins in our crib.

I guess Ma wanted life to be as dainty as the lace she crocheted for her frontroom curtains. Maybe she never realized its impossibility, though she had reason enough. She had the house and garden work of the farm. She had Pa--a big, lusty, sullen man. She had no daughter; just the pair of freckled hellions that was Mark and me. And she had her brother, Uncle Henry, the wildest of the lot in a way, though he was far, far off. But other worlds were almost beyond her conception.

Poor Ma. Perhaps she needed that lacy dream of peace in pure defense: tea in the afternoon, like a lady. Robins singing in cherry trees. Sunshine, dew, gentle rain. Steady, even work. No car wrecks, fights, wars, storms, or fantastic novelty. Generations going on and on, without much change. Young folks loving, marrying, having babies. Old folks dying quietly in bed. No violent past; no uncertain, magnificent future. Everything always real civilized. She had some of all that, too, of course. But it always broke . . .

I could tell you about mischief that was our fault. Busted windows. The gory spectacle of a fifteen-year-old tough who lived down the road, and who finally tried to push the Harvey twins around, when we were scarcely eight. We pelted his head with rocks. Then we beat him.

When she found out, I thought

Ma would whale us good. But she didn't. She was a little woman--little and tired. And then she just looked sick and sad. That was worse; though some realistic people would say that we had done right . . .

"Boys," she said. "There must have been a better way."

We were ashamed. "Ma, we're sorry--Chet and me are sorry as the dickens," Mark pleaded.

She forced a smile again, so we felt better. The sunshine over green, orderly farmland looked idyllic once more. The violence was lost. For a little while the drumbeats of barbarian adventure, reaching into space, now, to colonize the planets, faded a little in our savage blood.

But Ma's illusion that at last the Earth was--or should be--a cultured place, kept getting hurt; and sometimes it was Nature at Large that was at fault, and not the primal urges inside my brother and me.

Take the night of wind and storm when lightning struck the big oak in our front yard. Lord, what a crash! The sound alone went through me as through jelly, leaving me for seconds paralyzed. And there was a smell in the air as if somebody had opened and closed the fire-door of some unnamed but still intriguing Hades. Yeah--ozone that smell was.

Ma came running to our bed, her arms enveloping us protectingly.

"We didn't throw that lightning bolt, Ma!" Mark denied. "And--shucks--we're all right. I'm not even scared. It's only Chet that is."

Yes--I was trembling, I knew.

Mark not scared? Nuts! By the light that Ma had turned on, he was fairly brave!

"Scared, hunh--yuh dope!" I yelled. "Look at yourself!" And I took a poke at him, which he ducked. Then Ma had to drag us apart; and she shook us, and said in a thick voice:

"Can't you even behave at a time like this?"

She pulled down the shade so that we couldn't see that the whole sky was turning red. A mile away the MacFedtridge barn was burning in the rain and the wind. "At that we don't have to look, boys," she said.

Maybe she'd always been acting kind of like an ostrich. Her eyes looked sort of wild and puzzled. But in her own way she did have courage.

We helped Pa cut up that big, splintered oak, which had just missed falling on the house. Just looking at it, broken, with great sheared surfaces of golden wood showing, was like a savage symphony or an epic poem. It was sad and magnificent. It was like the barbarous forces in the Earth and the sky. It was a little like holding a handful of stars, while knowing at the same time that that was impossible--that they were big and hot beyond imagining. It was like knowing that far beyond the sky there were weird red deserts, and ruins left by beings extinct for millions of years, and elsewhere, jungles and swamp-mists, or seas of cold methane and ammonia gases, and the shapes of things unimaginable even in dreams . . .

But most of all it was like knowing that men like Uncle Henry were already going to such impossible places--because now there were ways to master forces beside which the lightning was only a flicker. And there, there was a furious yearning and a promise, for us.

Out of that ruined tree came another sign of savagery that was

gone, or perhaps only changed. It also had romance. As Mark and I drew our crosscut saw through the heart of that great trunk, the shiny teeth snarled suddenly, and sparks jetted out along with the sawdust. Then came a sliver of flint . . .

We showed it to Ma at dinnertime. Our eyes were shining. In our imaginations, brown, painted faces, more than a century gone, peered wickedly from the bushes, out over Ma's well-kept gladious. Warriors, hunters, killers!

"Indians, Ma!" I enthused. "Right here near Pine Crest! One shot an arrow into the oak when it was just a little tree!"

She looked at us as if she wished that we were less sunbrowned and earthy and pagan--less like the chipmunks in the woods. She looked at us as if the frightening monsters we spoke of could never have been, here in this well-ordered, industrious region.

"Indians!" she said, as if trying futilely to picture them. "There aren't any . . . And why can't you wash your hands a little cleaner when you come to the table? . . ."

Yep--that was the way she was.

There was one more incident which I remember especially. During the next March, when the snow was melting. On a breathless night, with a hazy moon, and humid warmth. Water gurgled. I awoke in our bed, all cold and sweaty and quivering, as if I'd had a terrible nightmare, which I couldn't quite remember.

Mark whispered from beside me: "Did you hear that, Chet?"

"Wait," I growled.

After a few seconds, the sound came again. It wasn't loud; it was ominous and soft. But it made the house tremble:

"Ump--pp-klump-p-p! . . . Ump--klump-p-p! . . ."

Ma and Pa were talking tensely in the hall.

"What is it, John? Where does it come from? We've got to find out! . . ." Ma's voice sounded

all uneven and scary.

Pa growled back: "How do I know! I'm looking, am I not?"

It came again and again and again --every minute or so. The luminous dial of our alarm clock, glowing in the dark, said three, and then three-thirty. About then, the noise ended. In some ways it was the most terrible sound I have ever heard. For its mystery defied explanation. It seemed to begin deep in the ground, as if in some well, or unknown cavern. It was like a heartbeat of the Earth, or of Nature. Were there caverns down under Ma's neat, civilized house? Frightening, unimaginable places? Wild and lonely?

Years later, we still haven't explained that sound. But one thing Pa found out the next day. The lake of snow-water that usually covers our rear ten acres in early spring had vanished in the night.

"Figured there was a sink-hole there," Pa said.

That same spring Ma got a telegram. Telegrams bothered her. This one made her turn pale. "He's sick," Ma said. "He's coming home. Darned fool should never have gone . . ."

"Who?" Mark and I wanted to know.

"Uncle Henry, of course," Ma answered. "He won't be here right away, boys. He'll have to be in a hospital out in Los Angeles for a while, first . . ."

Did I say that Mark and I had a special place in the esteem of the kids of the neighborhood, because Henry Davis was our uncle? Most of us had never seen a real spaceship, except now and then their rocket trails, high and enigmatic in the sky. Pa had promised to take Mark and me out to the Arizona Spaceport. But so far it hadn't happened.

Yet, along with other kids, we could dream of wild, wonderful unknowns. We read magazine articles, and basked in the glory that came our way, because our uncle had been on the moon and Mars and Venus,

and even farther. To us, as to the others, he was like a breath of the nameless. He walked with big explorers, like Thompson. And he had helped build the first human dome-settlements on fabulous Mars. So, to all of us kids, he was a legend, a shadowy half-god.

"When's he comin', Chet? . . . When's he comin', Mark? . . ." My brother and I got plenty of that; and it made us swell up with pride and cockiness till we might have burst.

When he did arrive he came in a new car, which he drove himself, like anybody. But all of a sudden I wasn't cocky anymore; I had stage-fright, as if I was going to meet the president, or somebody. It was the same with Mark. But pretty soon our awe began to be disappointed. I know I darn near got into a fight over it. Mark and I led a gang of kids to peek into our frontroom window that same evening, at Uncle Henry.

"Aw," Slat Cawkins growled contemptuously. "He looks like anybody --less, even. He looks dumb and little! And can you hear what he's talking about to your folks? 'How's Aunt Minnie's bad leg? How are her grandchildren? . . . Five years I've been out of real contact...' Shucks, Chet--is your uncle a member of the old ladies' sewing circle?"

"How'd you like a poke in the nose?" I snarled.

"Go kick yourself in the rear!" Slat answered. "I gotta have a reason to fight. I don't see any. Come on, gang--let's all go home. Even sleep's more interesting."

I felt murderous. But bitter, too. Because what Slat Cawkins had said seemed pretty true. Uncle Henry had always been a much smaller man than Pa. And he was sort of plain, like Ma. I could just dimly remember that he used to talk a lot. Now it was just "Hello, boys," in an offhand, tired way, as if endless, primal space had beaten him down. His face looked weathered

and sad, though he wasn't thirty yet. And he seemed to walk around in a daze, as if he couldn't quite believe he was on Earth; as if some earthly habits had been sort of lost in five years' time, and that he was fumbling to get them back.

Sometimes he seemed mean, too, even. Quite naturally Mark and I wanted to explore his trunk, as if for us it contained all the wild, unknown universe. But Uncle Henry caught us at it, before we could get started.

"Get out of there, you lousy brats!" he yelled at us, his voice like breaking glass.

Later, Ma said to him: "You'll be staying here now, Henry. You just have to start over. I'll bet you could get a fine job in the First National Bank."

He chuckled sourly at that, and I didn't blame him; though Ma couldn't understand. "You just don't step out of space as easily as that, Nell," he told her. "I only got a little weak in my nerves out there, that's all."

After that, he was more friendly to us twins. He opened his trunk for us. His treasures were exposed to our hungry gaze. We were more avid than ancient Goths sacking Rome. We saw carved stones and hammered gold. We smelled the smoky pungence of dried weeds from Mars. We saw photographs of structures fused down to glassy lumps by the nuclear heat of interplanetary war, fifty million years ago--between Mars and the world that had been blown apart to become the asteroids--proof that cultures more advanced than our own, and with gentle aspects, too, could end in fury. We saw the dried tentacle of a Martian. Our minds groped at thin, Martian winds, and at the hot mountains and deserts beneath Venus' blanket of murk and acid fumes. We saw Uncle Henry's clothes, worn when he lived in a spaceship, or somewhere else, Out There.

He even put on his space armor

for us. As he did so, he was in no daze at all. Like bear cubs learning from an elder, we watched his every quick, precise movement, as he snapped this or that into place. The great bulging attire covered the little man, hid his smallness and his almost rustic plainness, and gave him the aspect of some immortal demon, at home among the stars.

So Mark and I, who had felt let down before, got the thrills back, and the furious beat of our blood, that made us want to penetrate the strangest of the strange.

"I'm going back the day after tomorrow, Nell," Uncle Henry told Ma quietly. "I've made up my mind. A man has to live with his times, and with the way he is . . ."

So it was. He drove away in his car. But it seemed to Mark and me that he drove straight out into the western sky and the sunset, and vanished there, like a genie.

Ma? There was a big hill just a short distance behind our house. First she climbed up there. Pa used to say that it was an interesting geological formation, and that he wished scientists would dig into it. But to Ma it was "The most peaceful thing I ever saw." She used to go there to think, and maybe to pray for our souls, and, in springtime, to pick birdfoot violets.

Later that evening, we found her in our room, just looking around, her eyes kind of misty. At the new paint over patched plaster. At our old bed, our clothes, our baseball stuff, the pictures we cut out of magazines, and at the crude spaceship models we had put together.

"What's up, Ma?" I asked.

She looked embarrassed; but then she was frank.

"I was just thinking, boys," she said. "About how it'll be when both of you are gone--out after your Uncle Henry. A few years more . . ."

We wanted to be kind to her. "Chet and I aren't going, Ma," Mark piped up. "We're both gonna get jobs in the First National Bank, and everything'll be the same as always, forever."

"No--you're wrong, boys," she answered. "I ought to accept it. There's a bright, shining devil inside of most of you youngsters. I wish it could be stopped. But maybe that wouldn't be any good. It's your destiny--especially yours. Especially now, when everything just rushes on and on . . ."

For that single moment, Ma seemed almost to understand us.

Later, still, Pa said something to us, too:

"Your mother's a wonderful woman. But most women have a streak of the same thing in them--wanting a sheltered life, where things stay put. Living dangerously is out of line with that. But don't listen to them too much, fellas. Look at me. Once I wanted to move us all to Alaska, to better opportunity--maybe. Your mother talked me out of it--said we'd work things out at home. So we're still stuck on this stony farm . . ."

Pa had his own bitterness--his maybes and his might-have-beens.

So Mark and I did what we could do, followed our wild impulses, and the force that can be either constructive or destructive. Out of high school at seventeen, we signed up, and went away to learn more of what we needed to know. About nuclear reaction motors, in which man controls the power that gives him the distance. About quick action, precise and keen, that can save your life out there, or the lives of your friends. About metal pressed into sharkish shapes--wild poetry of form. About what one needs to know far from Earth, where even simple instinctive actions, like walking, can seem a little wrong . . . All this to help keep the times moving onward, to satisfy the primitive urge to probe the

unknown, and to satisfy the curiosity in blood and bone and mind.

Many thousands of other young men and women throughout the world were following the same track. It was a current in the spirit of the age that couldn't be stopped.

They sent us first to Venus, not verdant and beautiful as a more sunward twin of Earth should be, but smothered with dust, heat, carbon dioxide, and sulphuric acid, all at a pressure of ninety atmospheres. There were vast deserts under the dust clouds, where the winds blew forever. Here was a world which somehow had never received its rightful portion of water.

There on Venus, in a camp of low metal buildings, sealed against the poisoned air, they kept us for several months, to toughen our muscles, nerves, and minds. We met and lived with strangeness. We enlarged the camp. We dug for ores.

Then the Colonial Office picked a few of us, to send us farther. Mark and I had come out rugged, the rough corners knocked off and smoothed down a little. To reach farther into space, they needed big, cool, primal men, with a hard, realistic viewpoint. Nor was ours the only human nation groping beyond the Earth. In that, there was the usual savage danger.

We were going on, sunward, to Mercury. But a little while after our ship, The Solar Mote, left, news reached Mark and me. Poor Ma. She hadn't escaped violence even in her own end. She couldn't even die in bed. Pa and she were killed in a car-wreck. But maybe it had happened too quickly for her to know . . . Maybe the real cause was the recklessness of frustration deep inside Pa. So, in a way, they had died as furiously as Uncle Henry had. He had been lost long ago in a ship that fell into the boiling methane-and-ammonia atmosphere of Jupiter. It had been unable to pull away from the tremen-

dous gravity.

We, the wild Harvey twins, stood together for a minute with bowed heads. But then life, with all the fury that makes it alive, had to go on.

The Solar Mote with its five hundred men shot on for Mercury. Nearer the sun, the increased radiation, itself, becomes a barrier. Even spacecraft, brightly polished to reflect heat, can be ovens inside. Ingenuity had to be used to make travel possible here. So our ship moved in the center of a cloud of smoke--finely divided carbon particles--to provide it with shade.

We were not the first humans to reach Mercury. Smaller exploring parties, sent out by various nations including our own, had preceded us. Ages before that, beings had come--from Mars, and from that other, small, swiftly developing planet. But we were here to colonize, and to exploit the metallic resources, and to make a speck of Mercury's surface a little like the Earth, so that people could live there.

Long ago, solar gravity slowed Mercury's rotation, so that for about half of its eighty-eight terrestrial-day year, its sunward hemisphere often receives almost nine times as much heat and light as the Earth does. But then Mercury's very gradual axial turning brings on an equally long night, and close to absolute zero cold.

We landed in the region of creeping sunrise--relatively cool then. Of atmosphere there is only a trace on Mercury--not even a whisper--mostly argon and helium. In the slanting light, masses of old lava cast shadows across the dun plain.

We came down into this region of quiet and sadness and dun hues. We came into a valley, previously selected by an exploring party, a year before. For Mark and me and others, it was still a place of wonder.

But right away our bunch met

with bad luck. Landing sternward, sliding down gently backward on our jets, was standard procedure. But as we were going down, our main stabilizing gyroscope quit. So our ship did not stand vertically; it tipped over, like a tree falling.

I heard the dying whine of the gyro-rotor; then that treacherous sway. Then men shouting in alarm. Then the slow, sideward fall, and the jolting crash--even in the slight gravity. The injured screamed, and there was a sizzle of air escaping from between sprung plates in our hull.

It wasn't absolute catastrophe, of course. Mark grinned at me from his acceleration hammock. He and I and most of the others had managed to stay in our hammocks, and were safe. A few men were thrown out of them, and had gotten bounced around and injured. I don't think that any got panicky, and climbed out of their own accord. We were too well trained and well picked a crowd for that.

Our Old Man, Captain Nelson, got on the ball right away, directing repairs. Promptly, we were busy, welding and patching leaks. Outside, in space armor, we assembled the great hoist, with which we eventually brought our ship back to the vertical again. But it took hours, and much work; and worst of all it frayed nerves and dispositions.

Besides, we had lost considerable air. And one of our water tanks had been ripped wide open and emptied into the thirsty dust of Mercury. But the worst was a kind of pall of nerve-tension and annoyance which settled over us. We'd started off with the wrong foot. It soured everything, a little. When you throw the coordinated mechanism that is a spaceship a bit out of kilter in one respect, a lot of other things are apt to be affected, too. For one thing, for a while the galley went haywire. Our food came out burnt, or half cold.

Really we were lucky. We were following a plan, of course. Or would you call it a dream? Our ship carried it, and we'd all seen it--the model of a mining town--sealed barracks, houses, offices, machinery, gardens, a recreation center, everything--in lightweight metal. And we had the real, prefabricated makings of that tiny town, in the bowels of our ship, packed away.

And within a few hundred yards of our landing spot was the part of the valley that had been preselected for us to set up our settlement. Borings had shown the explorers that rich ores were not far under the valley floor. In deeper pockets, there was even a considerable trace of water in the seemingly parched rock, for our solar stills to remove for our use.

Most of the valley was in the welcome shadow of the mountains. But there was a high mesa of rock at its center, on which to mount the reflectors of our great solar smelting furnace, that, except during the rare dips of the huge sun below the horizon, would give us a hundred-yard circle of heat, hotter than the solar surface.

"You all know your precise jobs," Captain Nelson told us. "So hop to it . . ." He was a grim, rigid sort of man, fifty or so, and as efficient as they come.

Construction and destruction can have the same lusty mood and rhythm. Ato-bulldozers went to work, pushing the accumulated dust of ages aside, digging down to bedrock and levelling it. As soon as this was done in a given area, we moved in with the parts of buildings, bolting them together. But our method, which aimed at smooth speed of operation, had a flaw. We should have cleared and levelled the entire area before we started construction at all . . .

The town was more than a third built before little Armand Frane, one of our communications men, re-

marked to me: "Artifacts have been found in various places on Mercury before. And we are by no means the first beings to come to this valley, Chet."

In his space-gloved hand he held a fragment of mirror-glass--part of some sun-furnace's reflector, no doubt.

"I recognize the workmanship as old Martian," little Frane said. "They were here--how long ago?--before they were destroyed in the war with the Asteroid Planet. And there's a lot more than this. Come on and see. It's all going to pieces now, under the dozers . . ."

Since there were many dangers, our expedition was operating in a very military manner. Interest took possession of me, of course. But I said:

"Can't go now, Frane. I'm building houses."

Mark had come over by us. "There's a break in ten minutes, Chet," he said. "Well have a look then."

We found Nelson, in his captain's white armor, directing operations. His square face showed strain. Through my helmet-phones, I heard him mutter, in some mixture of regret and exasperation:

"Damned stuff! Why did it have to get in the way? Can't change the whole plan now . . . Why didn't Survey examine the site better? . . ."

His eyes showed the tension of the mishaps that had afflicted us. He had a purpose to fulfill, a settlement to build according to the precise specifications of the Colonial Office. And the lusty lot of us, cooped up too long in The Solar Mote, had been hollering for more comfortable quarters. Besides, in common with many who live long with discipline, I suspect that he was rather rigid in his thinking. What could ancient artifacts mean, when balanced against all this? Oh--I got his viewpoint, all right . . .

"Keep on with the work," he ordered the dozermen.

Several of them leaned to it with a will, and with wide grins--like barbarians on a binge.

The dozers shoved and bit deep. Steel met glazed porcelain--blue and white, with touches of red. Rich mosaics that had lain hidden and preserved by dust, and by the almost airlessness of Mercury, snapped and crumbled. The outline of a Martian structure came into view. And the chink-like compartments, and the cells they slept in--resembling those of a great honeycomb--useless to man except in knowledge and art. Laid bare, too, were the gardens that they had loved, once lush and glassed-over, but now showing only the dried, preserved stumps, where once there had been the perfume of weird Martian flowers.

I saw Mark's heavy face go thundery, even though he was never specially known for his gentleness and love of beauty. So there must have been a very special reason, indeed. Maybe for that same reason, a sick anger was rising in me. Or had I gone a little Mercury-nuts?

I heard Frane say further: "Nothing near as well preserved as this was ever found on Mars itself. There was more weather there, to wear things down. And the war with that other world, destroying everything. This was a mining settlement, too, I suppose--made beautiful. Or were the Martians who came here the last survivors of the war, fleeing, seeking refuge? No--they must have been mine colonists. We've seen the shafts . . . Maybe they went home when their planet was in danger . . ."

Frane stopped musing. Then he did what a small, studious, quiet guy might be expected to do. He went over to our Old Man and said, "If you please, Sir?" and waited for recognition.

"What is it, Frane?" Nelson snapped.

"I wish to protest this action, Sir," Frane said. "I believe that a means could be found to avoid operations in this area, until it is cleared carefully by archeologists. For instance, our settlement might be extended in another direction--with some re-designing, and not too much inconvenience. Otherwise, a great deal of cultural knowledge may be lost forever."

Nelson eyed him, then answered very formally: "I have weighed these considerations, Frane, and made my decisions. We are builders, under specific orders, with a task to complete. Nonetheless, thank you for an opinion, Frane."

The dozers kept grinding on. Another wall crumpled near us. A lacy bit of metal, part of a frieze of gold, later to be picked up in bent fragments, crumpled and broke. Treasures hidden under dust, piled up through the ages by ghost-thin Mercurian winds, were smashed beneath the dozer treads.

Now I heard Mark muse: "Like Ma's crocheted lace . . ."

He went over to the Old Man and said bluntly: "Let me add my protests to those of Mr. Frane, Sir." His voice was almost a growl.

I'll concede that Nelson had no wish to represent vandalism in our minds. But in addition to other things, he must have been frayed out and dog-tired.

"Harvey," he said. "Unless you go back to your assigned duties, I will consider you insubordinate."

That, and several other finely balanced circumstances, did it. Mark and I were never heroes; but we were still impulsive. I thought of Ma, and of her love of sheltered peace and beauty--which had no conception of distances or strangeness like those of Mercury or Mars. And of her violent end. And I thought of this beauty that was here, being smashed, conceived and wrought by beings of which she had been scarcely aware; though in a way their artifacts were like her own pretty

things, and so she would have defended them from destruction.

She was inside my flesh, and in my memory. Maybe it was more than she. It was the thing in most any mother's son, that reacts against the crude vandal urge. It was in my blood and race, I'm glad to say--steadying and protective. But for me, it came back to her, as my symbol. Yet it was furious, too. Perhaps even Ma would have fought fire with fire.

I acted almost before I knew it. Maybe, as I've said, I was a bit Mercury-nuts. Anyway, I leaped ahead of the nearest bulldozer, and stood my ground. Its driver stopped it. But then an order came from Nelson, and it ground on. I toppled with the moving dust and rock, and was dragged along. Scrambling up, I jumped ahead of the dozer again.

This time, I drew my pistol. We were all armed; because who knew what other countries on Earth had ambitions to take over at least part of Mercury, or what their attitude would be, or at what moment they would act? . . . I had no wish to kill; but I fired at the dozer's blade to emphasize my stand.

As I tumbled and scrambled once more, I saw Mark doing the same as I was, in front of another dozer. And Frane was on his feet, defying a third!

We rose, we fell again; we rose, we fired . . . And I heard Nelson say softly, without rancor:

"This is mutiny, boys. The penalty is hanging . . ."

For once I controlled my fury--or really there wasn't much of it to control, now. Rather, it was cold doggedness. Or could one call it a gentle anger?

"Not mutiny," I heard myself declare. "I'll obey orders anywhere, except in matters like this . . . This is different--maybe some of it is impractical. But the thing behind it is what makes the human race as good as it is. If it pre-

vails, it'll be the one thing that keeps our kind from eventual self-destruction . . ."

I flopped again. My weapon was empty. I saw that Mark's own blood had reddened his armored shoulder. Little Frane was half buried, up-rising. But I ducked down in front of the dozer, and thus got a little protection. Once more I was knocked down, bruised, and half buried. But I could see that Frane and my brother were still in the fight. Falling, struggling up, weaker and weaker--but always game--and for not too much purpose except principle.

I guess that the gameness was more eloquent than words. Because a couple of dozer men stopped their vehicles of their own accord. But before that happened, there were other men beside me, facing my dozer, and others confronting other machines. They were grim, tough young men, for the most part not overly inclined toward intellectual interests.

Nelson called a halt to the gruesome business. "All right, fellas," he said, almost in relief. "I didn't know that there was so much personnel with archeological sympathies in this expedition. Good. I'm glad . . . Now if you can stand the extra delay in getting the town redesigned, and set up in another direction, and back me up at the home office for the change, everything is fine. All right?"

The enthusiastic shouts were an uplifting indication that our errant and savage kind was a better candidate to inherit the future than some might have thought. Fury had helped man to struggle up from nothing. He had used it even as a tool for building. To fight for the future had a primitive sound. Yet it was a force that could be controlled and directed, with wisdom.

Nelson did press charges against Mark and me, and Frane, and the others. Our punishment was extra

duty, digging into the Martian ruins carefully, with shovels. It was a punishment to satisfy the records, so that there could be no later claim that we had not expiated any misdeeds.

Soon our settlement was a going concern, metals spurting to incandescence in the great sun-furnace, as the mines began to operate. When the next ship arrived, there were even girls among the new personnel.

But with our contract ended, Mark and I were free to go home.

"We ought to go, Chet," Mark said.

We did go home. The country around Pine Crest was as peaceful and pretty as a summer dream. It showed no memory of winter harshness, nor of all its ages of savage history, marked by storm and lightning and sudden death. It smiled innocently--insincere. It could fool you, the way it had fooled Ma. But Ma and Pa weren't alive anymore.

One of the last things that Pa had done was to write a letter to an important scientific foundation, inviting them to investigate the big hill behind our house, which Ma had always thought so peaceful . . .

Well, a party of their men was there when we arrived, and we saw an ugly fossil that they had unearthed--a dinosaur about the size of a horse, with its legs straddled apart, and its whole viscera obviously eaten, those millions of years ago. Barbarians that we were, this brutal evidence of drama unthinkable remote kind of thrilled Mark and me, though our Ma wouldn't have approved.

Then Mark and I went to the cemetery. We just put a bouquet of flowers on Pa's grave, and bowed

our heads, and didn't say anything, because he had been too much like ourselves--big and ugly, and full of sullen, savage fire.

But with Ma it had to be different. First we pushed a strip of Mercutian gold, wrought like lace by Martians, into the sod of her grave.

"You'd like the looks of that gold-work, Ma--even though you never cared for such terrible distance," Mark said.

That gentle anger came over me again, as at a nice child who has somehow failed to meet life on its own terms. It was like regret.

To what Mark had said, I added:

"Ma, you didn't see that dinosaur that another dinosaur murdered, right there under your special, quiet hill. It was there all the time, and long before . . . This region, like the whole world and universe, has always been something like that, Ma. A car killed you, here . . . Well, I guess there's no argument between you and us, because I think you didn't want to know. Or did you see farther than we can? . . . We've got to go on, knowing the fury, and kind of liking it, Ma. We'd be bored stiff, otherwise. Because we're savages inside, Mark and me. But we hope we've done some good, and will do more, helping to add a little to knowledge and wisdom . . . Thanks, Ma, for being you, and for being like an ideal . . ."

The following evening, Mark and I, being what we were, had ourselves a time in the honkytonk amusement area at the edge of the Arizona spaceport. Then, gleefully, we signed on, on a ship going out to explore the rings and moons of Saturn . . .



The Dragon-Queen of Jupiter

By LEIGH BRACKETT

More feared than the deadly green snakes, the hideous red beetles of that outpost of Earth Empire, was the winged dragon-queen of Jupiter and her white Legions of Doom.

Tex stirred uneasily where he lay on the parapet, staring into the heavy, Jupiterian fog. The greasy moisture ran down the fort wall,

lay rank on his lips. With a sigh for the hot, dry air of Texas, and a curse for the adventure-thirst that made him leave it, he shifted

his short, steel-hard body and wrinkled his sandy-red brows in the never-ending effort to see.

A stifled cough turned his head. He whispered, "Hi, Breska."

The Martian grinned and lay down beside him. His skin was wind-burned like Tex's, his black eyes nested in wrinkles caused by squinting against sun and blowing dust.

For a second they were silent, feeling the desert like a bond between them. Then Breska, mastering his cough, grunted:

"They're an hour late now. What's the matter with 'em?"

Tex was worried, too. The regular dawn attack of the swamp-dwellers was long overdue.

"Reckon they're thinking up some new tricks," he said. "I sure wish our relief would get here. I could use a vacation."

Breska's teeth showed a cynical flash of white.

"If they don't come soon, it won't matter. At that, starving is pleasanter than beetle-bombs, or green snakes. Hey, Tex. Here comes the Skipper."

Captain John Smith--Smith was a common name in the Volunteer Legion--crawled along the catwalk. There were new lines of strain on the officer's gaunt face, and Tex's uneasiness grew.

He knew that supplies were running low. Repairs were urgently needed. Wasn't the relief goin' to come at all?

But Captain Smith's pleasant English voice was as calm as though he were discussing cricket-scores in a comfortable London club.

"Any sign of the beggars, Tex?"

"No, sir. But I got a feeling . . ."

"H'm. Yes. We all have. Well, keep a sharp . . ."

A scream cut him short. It came from below in the square compound. Tex shivered, craning down through the rusty netting covering the well.

He'd heard screams like that before.

A man ran across the greasy stones, tearing at something on his wrist. Other men ran to help him, the ragged remnant of the force that had marched into new Fort Washington three months before, the first garrison.

The tiny green snake on the man's wrist grew incredibly. By the time the first men reached it, it had whipped a coil around its victim's neck. Faster than the eye could follow, it shifted its fangs from wrist to throat.

The man seemed suddenly to go mad. He drew his knife and slashed at his comrades, screaming, keeping them at bay.

Then, abruptly, he collapsed. The green snake, now nearly ten feet long, whipped free and darted toward a drainage tunnel. Shouting men surrounded it, drawing rapid-fire pistols, but Captain Smith called out:

"Don't waste your ammunition, men!"

Startled faces looked up. And in that second of respite, the snake coiled and butted its flat-nosed head against the grating.

In a shower of rust-flakes it fell outward, and the snake was gone like a streak of green fire.

Tex heard Breska cursing in a low undertone. A sudden silence had fallen on the compound. Men fingered the broken grating, white-faced as they realized what it meant. There would be no metal for repairs until the relief column came.

It was hard enough to bring bare necessities over the wild terrain. And air travel was impracticable due to the miles-thick clouds and magnetic vagaries. There would be no metal, no ammunition.

Tex swore. "Reckon I'll never get used to those varmints, Captain. The rattlers back home was just kid's toys."

"Simple enough, really." Captain Smith spoke absently, his gray eyes following the sag of the rusty net-

ting below.

"The green snakes, like the planarians, decrease evenly in size with starvation. They also have a vastly accelerated metabolism. When they get food, which happens to be blood, they simply shoot out to their normal size. An injected venom causes their victims to fight off help until the snake has fed."

Breska snarled. "Cute trick the swamp men thought up, starving those things and then slipping them in on us through the drain pipes. They're so tiny you miss one, every once in a while."

"And then you get that." Tex nodded to the corpse. "I wonder who the war-chief is. I'd sure like to get a look at him."

"Yes," said Captain Smith. "So would I."

He turned to go, crawling below the parapet. You never knew what might come out of the fog at you, if you showed a target. The body was carried out to the incinerator as there was no ceremony about burials in this heat. A blob of white caught Tex's eye as a face strained upward, watching the officer through the rusty netting.

Tex grunted. "There's your countryman, Breska. I'd say he isn't so sold on the idea of making Venus safe for colonists."

"Oh, lay off him, Tex." Breska was strangled briefly by a fit of coughing. "He's just a kid, he's homesick, and he's got the wheezes, like me. This lowland air isn't good for us. But just wait till we knock sense into these white devils and settle the high plateaus."

If he finished, Tex didn't hear him. The red-haired Westerner was staring stiffly upward, clawing for his gun.

He hadn't seen or heard a thing. And now the fog was full of thundering wings and shrill screams of triumph. Below the walls, where the ground-mist hung in stagnant whorls, a host of half-seen bodies

crowded out of the wilderness into which no civilized man had ever gone.

The rapid-fire pistol bucked and snarled in Tex's hand. Captain Smith, lying on his belly, called orders in his crisp, unhurried voice. C Battery on the northeast corner cut in with a chattering roar, spraying explosive bullets upward, followed by the other three whose duty it was to keep the air clear.

Tex's heart thumped. Powder-smoke bit his nostrils. Breska began to whistle through his teeth, a song that Tex had taught him, called, "The Lone Prairies."

The ground-strafting crews got their guns unlimbered, and mud began to splash up from below. But it wasn't enough. The gun emplacements were only half manned, the remainder of the depopulated garrison having been off-duty down in the compound.

The Jupiterians were swarming up the incline on which the fort stood, attacking from the front and fanning out along the sides when they reached firm ground. The morasses to the east and west were absolutely impassable even to the swamp-men, which was what made Fort Washington a strategic and envied stronghold.

Tex watched the attackers with mingled admiration and hatred. They had guts; the kind the Red Indians must have had, back in the old days in America. They had cruelty, too, and a fiendish genius for thinking up tricks.

If the relief column didn't come soon, there might be one trick too many, and the way would be left open for a breakthrough. The thin, hard-held line of frontier posts could be flanked, cut off, and annihilated.

Tex shuddered to think what that would mean for the colonists, already coming hopefully into the fertile plateaus.

A sluggish breeze rolled the mist south into the swamps, and

Tex got his first clear look at the enemy. His heart jolted sharply.

This was no mere raid. This was an attack.

Hordes of tall warriors swarmed toward the walls, pale-skinned giants from the Sunless Land with snow-white hair coiled in warclubs at the base of the skull. They wore girdles of reptile skin, and carried bags slung over their brawny shoulders. In their hands they carried clubs and crude bows.

Beside them, roaring and hissing, came their war-dogs; semi-erect reptiles with prehensile paws, their powerful tails armed with artificial spikes of bone.

Scaling ladders banged against the walls. Men and beasts began to climb, covered by companions on the ground who hurled grenades of baked mud from their bags.

"Beetle-bombs!" yelled Tex. "Watch yourselves!"

He thrust one ladder outward, and fired point-black into a dead-white face. A flying clay ball burst beside the man who fired the nearest ground gun, and in a split second every inch of bare flesh was covered by a sheath of huge scarlet beetles.

Tex's freckled face hardened. The man's screams knifed upward through the thunder of wings. Tex put a bullet carefully through his head and tumbled the body over the parapet. Some of the beetles were shaken off, and he glimpsed bone, already bare and gleaming.

Missiles rained down from above; beetle-bombs, green snakes made worm-size by starvation. The men were swarming up from the compound now, but the few seconds of delay almost proved fatal.

The aerial attackers were plain in the thinning mist--lightly-built men mounted on huge things that were half bird, half lizard.

The rusty netting jerked, catching the heavy bodies of man and lizard shot down by the guns. Tex

held his breath. That net was all that protected them from a concerted dive attack that would give the natives a foot-hold inside the walls.

A gun in A Battery choked into silence. Rust, somewhere in the mechanism. No amount of grease could keep it out.

Breska swore sulphurously and stamped a small green thing flat. Red beetles crawled along the stones--thank God the things didn't fly. Men fought and died with the snakes. Another gun suddenly cut out.

Tex fired steadily at fierce white heads thrust above the parapet. The man next him stumbled against the infested stones. The voracious scarlet flood surged over him, and in forty seconds his uniform sagged on naked bones.

Breska's shout warned Tex aside as a lizard fell on the catwalk. Its rider pitched into the stream of beetles and began to die. Wings beat close overhead, and Tex crouched, aiming upward.

His freckled face relaxed in a stare of utter unbelief.

She was beautiful. Pearl-white thighs circling the gray-green barrel of her mount, silver hair streaming from under a snake-skin diadem set with the horns of a swamp-rhino, a slim body clad in girdle and breast-plates of iridescent scales.

Her face was beautiful, too, like a mask cut from pearl. But her eyes were like pale-green flames, and the silver brows above them were drawn into a straight bar of anger.

Tex had never seen such cold, fierce hate in any living creature, even a rattler coiled to strike.

His gun was aimed, yet somehow he couldn't pull the trigger. When he had collected his wits, she was gone, swooping like a stunting flyer through the fire of the guns. She bore no weapons, only what looked like an ancient hunting-horn.

Tex swore, very softly. He knew what that horned diadem meant.

This was the war chief!

The men had reached the parapet just in time. Tex blasted the head from a miniature Tyrannosaurus, dodged the backlash of the spiked tail, and threw down another ladder. Guns snarled steadily, and corpses were piling up at the foot of the wall.

Tex saw the woman urge her flying mount over the pit of the compound, saw her searching out the plan of the place--the living quarters, the water tanks, the kitchen, the radio room.

Impelled by some inner warning that made him forget all reluctance to war against a woman, Tex fired.

The bullet clipped a tress of her silver hair. Eyes like pale green flames burned into his for a split second, and her lips drew back from reptilian teeth, white, small, and pointed.

Then she whipped her mount into a swift spiral climb and was gone, flashing through streamers of mist and powder-smoke.

A second later Tex heard the mellow notes of her horn, and the attackers turned and vanished into the swamp.

As quickly as that, it was over. Yet Tex, panting and wiping the sticky sweat from his forehead, wasn't happy.

He wished she hadn't smiled.

Men with blow-torches scoured the fort clean of beetles and green snakes. One party sprayed oil on the heaps of bodies below and fired them. The netting was cleared, their own dead buried.

Tex, who was a corporal, got his men together, and his heart sank as he counted them. Thirty-two left to guard a fort that should be garrisoned by seventy.

Another attack like that, and there might be none. Yet Tex had an uneasy feeling that the attack had more behind it than the mere attempt to carry the fort by storm. He thought of the woman whose brain had evolved all these hideous

schemes--the beetle-bombs, the green snakes. She hadn't risked her neck for nothing, flying in the teeth of four batteries.

He had salvaged the lock of silver hair his bullet had clipped. Now it seemed almost to stir with malign life in his pocket.

Captain John Smith came out of the radio room. The officer's gaunt face was oddly still, his gray eyes like chips of stone.

"At ease," he said. His pleasant English voice had that same quality of dead stillness.

"Word has just come from Regional Headquarters. The swamp men have attacked in force east of us, and have heavily besieged Fort Nelson. Our relief column had been sent to relieve them.

"More men are being readied, but it will take at least two weeks for any help to reach us."

Tex heard the hard-caught breaths as the news took the men like a jolt in the belly. And he saw eyes sliding furtively aside to the dense black smoke pouring up from the incinerator, to the water tanks, and to the broken grating.

Somebody whimpered. Tex heard Breska snarl, "Shut up!" The whimperer was Kuna, the young Martian who had stared white-faced at the captain a short while before.

Captain Smith went on.

"Our situation is serious. However, we can hold out another fortnight. Supplies will have to be rationed still further, and we must conserve ammunition and man-power as much as possible. But we must all remember this.

"Help is coming. Headquarters are doing all they can."

"With the money they have," said Breska sourly, in Tex's ear. "Damn the taxpayers!"

". . . and we've only to hold out a few days longer. After all, we volunteered for this job. Jupiter is a virgin planet. It's savage, uncivilized, knowing no law but brute force. But it can be

built into a great new world.

"If we do our jobs well, some day these swamps will be drained, the jungles cleared, the natives civilized. The people of Earth and Mars will find new hope and freedom here. It's up to us."

The captain's grim, gaunt face relaxed, and his eyes twinkled.

"Pity we're none of us using our right names," he said. "Because I think we're going to get them in the history books!"

The men laughed. The tension was broken. "Dismissed," said Captain Smith, and strolled off to his quarters. Tex turned to Breska.

The Martian, his leathery dark face set, was gripping the arms of his young countryman, the only other Martian in the fort.

"Listen," hissed Breska, his teeth showing white like a dog's fangs. "Get hold of yourself! If you don't, you'll get into trouble."

Kuna trembled, his wide black eyes watching the smoke from the bodies roll up into the fog. His skin lacked the leathery burn of Breska's. Tex guessed that he came from one of the Canal cities, where things were softer.

"I don't want to die," said Kuna softly. "I don't want to die in this rotten fog."

"Take it easy, kid." Tex rubbed the sandy-red stubble on his chin and grinned. "The Skipper'll get us through okay. He's aces."

"Maybe." Kuna's eyes wandered round to Tex. "But why should I take the chance?"

He was shaken suddenly by a fit of coughing. When he spoke again, his voice had risen and grown tight as a violin string.

"Why should I stay here and cough my guts out for something that will never be anyway?"

"Because," said Breska grimly, "on Mars there are men and women breaking their backs and their hearts, to get enough bread out of the deserts. You're a city man, Kuna. Have you ever seen the fam-

ines that sweep the drylands? Have you ever seen men with their ribs cutting through the skin? Women and children with faces like skulls?

"That's why I'm here, coughing my guts out in this stinking fog. Because people need land to grow food on, and water to grow it with."

Kuna's dark eyes rolled, and Tex frowned. He'd seen that same stary look in the eyes of cattle on the verge of a stampede.

"What's the bellyache?" he said sharply. "You volunteered, didn't you?"

"I didn't know what it meant," Kuna whispered, and coughed. "I'll die if I stay here. I don't want to die!"

"What," Breska said gently, "are you going to do about it?"

Kuna smiled. "She was beautiful, wasn't she, Tex?"

The Texan stared. "I reckon she was, kid. What of it?"

"You have a lock of her hair. I saw you pick it up from the net. The net'll go out soon, like the grating did. Then there won't be anything to keep the snakes and beetles off of us. She'll sit up there and watch us die, and laugh."

"But I won't die, I tell you! I won't!"

He shuddered in Breska's hands, and began to laugh. The laugh rose to a thin, high scream like the wailing of a panther. Breska hit him accurately on the point of the jaw.

"Cafard," he grunted, as some of the men came running. "He'll come round all right."

He dragged Kuna to the dormitory, and came back doubled up with coughing from the exertion. Tex saw the pain in his dark face.

"Say," he murmured, "you'd better ask for leave when the relief gets here."

"If it gets here," gasped the Martian. "That attack at Fort Nelson was just a feint to draw off our reinforcements."

Tex nodded. "Even if the var-

mints broke through there, they'd be stopped by French River and the broken hills beyond it."

A map of Fort Washington's position formed itself in his mind; the stone blockhouse commanding a narrow tongue of land between strips of impassable swamp, barring the way into the valley. The valley led back into the uplands, splitting so that one arm ran parallel to the swamps for many miles.

To fierce and active men like the swamp-dwellers, it would be no trick to swarm down that valley, take Fort Albert and Fort George by surprise in a rear attack, and leave a gap in the frontier defenses that could never be closed in time.

And then hordes of white-haired warriors could swarm out, led by that beautiful fury on the winged lizard, rouse the more lethargic pastoral tribes against the colonists, and sweep outland Peoples from the face of Venus.

"They could do it, too," Tex muttered. "They outnumber us a thousand to one."

"And," added Breska viciously, "the lousy taxpayers won't even give us decent equipment to fight with."

Tex grinned. "Armies are always stepchildren. I guess the sheep just never did like the goats, anyhow." He shrugged. "Better keep an eye on Kuna. He might try something."

"What could he do? If he deserts, they'll catch him trying to skip out, if the savages don't get him first. He won't try it."

But in the morning Kuna was gone, and the lock of silver hair in Tex's pocket was gone with him.

Five hot, steaming days dragged by. The water sank lower and lower in the tank. Flakes of rust dropped from every metal surface at the slightest touch.

Tex squatted on a slimy block of stone in the compound, trying

to forget hunger and thirst in the task of sewing a patch on his pants. Fog gathered in droplets on the reddish hairs of his naked legs, covered his face with a greasy patina.

Breska crouched beside him, coughing in deep, slow spasms. Out under the sagging net, men were listlessly washing underwear in a tub of boiled swamp water. The stuff held some chemical that caused a stubborn sickness no matter what you did to it.

Tex looked at it thirstily. "Boy!" he muttered. "What I wouldn't give for just one glass of ice water!"

"Shut up," growled Breska. "At least, I've quit being hungry."

He coughed, his dark face twisted in pain. Tex sighed, trying to ignore the hunger that chewed his own belly like a prisoned wolf.

Nine more days to go. Food and water cut to the barest minimum. Gun parts rusting through all the grease they could put on. The strands of the net were perilously thin. Even the needle in his hand was rusted so that it tore the cloth.

Of the thirty-one men left after Kuna deserted, they had lost seven; four by green snakes slipped in through broken drain gratings, three by beetle-bombs tossed over the parapet. There had been no further attacks. In the dark, fog-wrapped nights swamp men smeared with black mud crept silently under the walls, delivered their messages of death, and vanished.

In spite of the heat, Tex shivered. How much longer would this silent war go on? The swamp-men had to clear the fort before the relief column came. Where was Kuna, and why had he stolen that lock of hair? And what scheme was the savage beauty who led these devils hatching out?

Water slopped in the tub. Somebody cursed because the underwear never dried in this lousy climate.

The heat of the hidden sun seeped down in stifling waves.

And suddenly a guard on the parapet yelled.

"Something coming out of the swamp! Man the guns!"

Tex hauled his pants on and ran with the others. Coming up beside the lookout, he drew his pistol and waited.

Something was crawling up the tongue of dry land toward the fort. At first he thought it was one of the scaly war-dogs. Then he caught a gleam of scarlet collar-facings, and shouted.

"Hold your fire, men! It's Kuna!"

The grey, stooped thing came closer, going on hands and knees, its dark head hanging. Tex heard Breska's harsh breathing beside him. Abruptly the Martian turned and ran down the steps.

"Don't go out there, Breska!" Tex yelled. "It may be a trap." But the Martian went on, tugging at the rusty lugs that held the postern gate. It came open, and he went out.

Tex sent men to guard it, fully expecting white figures to burst from the fog and attempt to force the gate.

Breska reached the crawling figure, hauled it erect and over one shoulder, and started back at a stumbling run. Still there was no attack. Tex frowned, assailed by some deep unease. If Kuna had gone into the swamps, he should never have returned alive. There was a trap here somewhere, a concealed but deadly trick.

Silence. The rank mist lay in lazy coils. Not a leaf rustled in the swamp edges.

Tex swore and ran down the steps. Breska fell through the gate and sagged down, coughing blood, and it was Tex who caught Kuna.

The boy lay like a grey skeleton in his arms, the bones of his face almost cutting the skin. His mouth was open. His tongue was black

and swollen, like that of a man dying of thirst.

Kuna's sunken, fever-yellowed eyes opened. They found the tub, in which soiled clothing still floated.

With a surge of strength that took Tex completely by surprise, the boy broke from him and ran to the water, plunging his face in and gulping like an animal.

Tex pulled him away. Kuna sagged down, sobbing. There was something wrong about his face, but Tex couldn't think what.

"Won't let me drink," he whispered. "Still won't let me drink. Got to have water." He clawed at Tex. "Water!"

Tex sent someone after it, trying to think what was strange about Kuna, scowling. There were springs of sweet water in the swamps, and even the natives couldn't drink the other. Was it simply the desire to torture that mad made them deny the deserter water?

Tex caught the boy's collar. "How did you get away?"

But Kuna struggled to his knees. "Breska," he gasped. "Breska!"

The older man looked at him, wiping blood from his lips. Kuna said something in Martian, retched, choked on his own blood, and fell over. Tex knew he was dead.

"What did he say, Breska?"

The Martian's teeth showed briefly white.

"He said he wished he'd had my guts." His expression changed abruptly. He caught Tex's shoulder.

"Look, Tex! Look at the water!"

Where there had been nearly a full tub, there was now only a little moisture left at the bottom. While Tex watched, that too disappeared, leaving the wood dry.

Tex picked up an undershirt. It was as dry as any he'd ever hung in the prairie air, back in Texas. He touched his face. The skin was like sun-cured leather. His hair had not a drop of fog on it.

Yet the mist hung as heavy as ever.

Captain Smith came out of the radio room, looking up at the net and the guns. Tex heard him mutter, quite unconsciously.

"It's the rust that'll beat us. It's the rust that'll lose us Jupiter in the end."

Tex said, "Captain. . . ."

Smith looked at him, startled. But he never had time to ask what the matter was. The lookout yelled. Wings rushed overhead. Guns chattered from the parapet. The attack was on.

Tex ran automatically for the catwalk. Passing Kuna's crumpled body, he realized something he should have seen at first.

"Kuna's body was dry when he came into the fort. All dry, even his clothes." And then, "Why did the swamp-men wait until he was safely inside and the door closed to attack?"

With a quarter of their guns disabled and two-thirds of their garrison gone, they still held superiority due to their position and powerful weapons.

There was no concerted attempt to force the walls. Groups of white-haired warriors made sallies, hurled beetle-bombs and weighed bags of green snakes, and retired into the mist. They lost men, but not many.

In the air, it was different. The weird, half-feathered mounts wheeled and swooped, literally diving into the gunbursts, the riders hurling missiles with deadly accuracy. And they were dying, men and lizards, by the dozen.

Tex, feeling curiously dazed, fired automatically. Bodies thrashed into the net. Rust flakes showered like rain. Looking at the thin strands, Tex wondered how long it would hold.

Abruptly he caught sight of what, subconsciously, he'd been looking for. She was there, darting high over the melee, her silver hair flying, her body an iridescent pearl in the mist.

Captain Smith spoke softly.

"You see what she's up to, Tex? Those flyers are volunteers. Their orders are to kill as many of our men as possible before they die themselves, but they must fall inside the walls! On the net, Tex. To weaken, break it, if possible."

Tex nodded. "And when it goes . . ."

"We go. We haven't enough men to beat them if they should get inside the walls."

Smith brushed his small military mustache, his only sign of nervousness. Tex saw him start, saw him touch the bristles wonderingly, then finger his skin, his tunic, his hair.

"Dry," he said, and looked at the fog. "My Lord, dry!"

"Yes," returned Tex grimly. "Kuna brought it back. He couldn't get wet even when he tried to drink. Something that eats water. Even if the net holds, we'll die of thirst before we're relieved."

He turned in sudden fury on the distant figure of the woman and emptied his gun futilely at her swift-moving body.

"Save your ammunition," cautioned Smith, and cried out, sharply.

Tex saw it, the tiny green thing that had fastened on his wrist. His pulled his knife and lunged forward, but already the snake had grown incredibly. Smith tore at it vainly.

Tex got in one slash, felt his knife slip futilely on the rubbery flesh of enormous contractile power. Then the venom began to work. A mad look twisted the officer's face. His gun rose and began to spit bullets.

Grimly, Tex shot the gun out of Smith's hand, and struck down with the bun-barrel. Smith fell. But already the snake had thrown a coil around his neck and shifted its grip to the jugular.

Tex sawed at the rubbery flesh. Beaten as though with a heavy whip, he stood at last with the body still writhing in his hand.

Captain Smith was dead, with the snake's jaws buried in his throat.

Dimly Tex heard the mellow notes of the war-chief's horn. The sky cleared of the remnants of the suicide squad. The ground attackers vanished into the swamps. And then the woman whirled her mount sharply and sped straight for the fort.

Puffs of smoke burst around her but she was not hit. Low over the parapet she came, so that Tex saw the pupils of her pale-green eyes, the vital flow of muscles beneath pearily skin.

He fired, but his gun was empty. She flung one hand high in derisive salute, and was gone. And Breska spoke softly behind Tex.

"You're in command now. And there are just fourteen of us left."

Tex stood staring down at the dead and dying caught in the rusty net. He felt suddenly tired; so tired that just standing and looking seemed too much drain on his wasted strength.

He didn't want to fight any more. He wanted to drink, to sleep, and forget.

There was only one possible end. His mouth and throat were dry with this strange new dryness, his thirst intensified a hundredfold. The swamp men had only to wait. In another week they could take the fort without losing a man.

Even with the reduced numbers of the defenders, this fiendish thing would make their remaining water supply inadequate. And then another thought struck him.

Suppose it stayed there, so that even if by some miracle the garrison held out, it made holding the fort impossible no matter how many men, or how much water, there was?

The men were looking at him. Tex let the dead snake drop to the catwalk and vanish under a pall of scarlet beetles.

"Clean up this mess," said Tex automatically. Breska's black eyes

were brilliant and very hard. Why didn't the men move?

"Go on," Tex snapped. "I'm ranking officer here now."

The men turned to their task with a queer reluctance. One of them, a big scar-faced hulk with a mop of hair redder far than Tex's, stood long after the others had gone, watching him out of narrowed green eyes.

Tex went slowly down into the compound. There were no breaks in the net, but another few days of rust would finish them.

What was the use of fighting on? If they left, now, they might get out alive. Headquarters could send more men, retake Fort Washington.

But Headquarters didn't have many men. And the woman with the eyes like pale-green flames wouldn't waste any time.

Some falling body had crushed a beetle-bomb caught in the net. The scarlet things were falling like drops of blood on Kuna's body. Tex smiled crookedly. In a few seconds there'd be nothing left of the flesh Kuna had cherished so dearly.

And then Tex rubbed freckled hands over his tired blue eyes, wondering if he were at last delirious.

The beetles weren't eating Kuna.

They swirled around him restlessly, scenting meat, but they didn't touch him. His face showed parchment dry under the whorls of fog. And suddenly Tex understood.

"It's because he's dry. They won't touch anything dry."

Recklessly, he put his own hand down in the scarlet stream. It divided and flowed around it, disdaining the parched flesh.

Tex laughed, a brassy laugh with an edge of hysteria in it. Now that they were going to die anyway, they didn't have to worry about beetle-bombs.

Feet, a lot of them, clumped up to where he knelt. The red-

haired giant with the green eyes stood over him, the men in a sullen, hard-faced knot behind him.

The red-haired man, whose name was Bull, had a gun in his hand. He said gruffly,

"We're leavin', Tex."

Tex got up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. We figure it's no use stayin'. Comin' with us?"

Why not? It was his only chance for life. He had no stake in the colonies. He'd joined the Legion for adventure.

Then he looked at Kuna, and at Breska, thinking of all the people of two worlds who needed ground to grow food on, and water to grow it with. Something, perhaps the ancestor who had died in the Alamo, made him shake his sandy head.

"I reckon not," he said. "And I reckon you ain't, either."

He was quick on the draw, but Bull had his gun already out. The bullet thundered against Tex's skull. The world exploded into fiery darkness, through which he heard Breska say,

"Sure, Bull. Why should I stay here to die for nothing?"

Tex tried to cry out, but the blackness drowned him.

He came to lying on the catwalk. His head was bandaged. Frowning, he opened his eyes, blinking against the pain.

Breska hunched over the nearest gun, whistling softly through his teeth. "The Lone Prairee." Tex stared incredulously.

"I-I thought you'd gone with the others."

Breska grinned. "I just wasn't as dumb as you. I hung behind till they were all outside, and then I barred the door. I'd seen you weren't dead, and--well, this cough's got me anyway, and I hate forced marches. They give me blisters."

They grinned at each other. Tex said,

"We're a couple of damn fools, but I reckon we're stuck with it.

Okay. Let's see how long we can fool 'em." He got up, gingerly. "The Skipper had some books in his quarters. Maybe one of 'em would tell what this dry stuff is."

Breska coughed and nodded. "I'll keep watch."

Tex's throat burned, but he was afraid to drink. If the water evaporated in his mouth as it had in Kuna's . . .

He had to try. Not knowing was worse than knowing. A second later he stood with an empty cup in his hand, fighting down panic.

Half the water had vanished before he got the cup to his mouth. The rest never touched his tongue. Yet there was nothing to see, nothing to feel. Nothing but dryness.

He turned and ran for Captain Smith's quarters.

Hertford's Jungles of Jupiter, the most comprehensive work on a subject still almost unknown, lay between Kelland's Field Tactics and Alice in Wonderland. Tex took it down, leafing through it as he climbed to the parapet.

"Here it is," he said suddenly. "Dry Spots. These are fairly common phenomena in certain parts of the swamplands. Seemingly Nature's method for preserving the free oxygen balance in the atmosphere, colonies of ultra-microscopic animalcules spring up, spreading apparently from spores carried by animals which blunder into the dry areas."

"These animalcules attach themselves to hosts, inanimate or otherwise, and absorb all water vapor or still water nearby, utilizing the hydrogen in some way not yet determined, and liberating free oxygen. They become dormant during the rainy season, apparently unable to cope with running water. They expand only within definite limits, and the life of each colony runs about three weeks, after which it vanishes."

"The rains start in about a week," said Breska. "Our relief can't get here under nine days.

They can pick us off with snakes and beetle-bombs, or let us go crazy with thirst, let the first shower clear out the ani--the whatyoucall-its, and move in. Then they can slaughter our boys when they come up, and have the whole of Jupiter clear."

Tex told him about Kuna and the beetles. "The snakes probably won't touch us, either." He pounded a freckled fist on the stones. "If we could find some way to drink, and if the guns and the net didn't rust, we might hold them off long enough."

"If," grunted Breska. "If we were in heaven, we wouldn't have to worry."

The days that followed blurred into a daze of thirst and ceaseless watching. For easier defense, there was only one way down from the parapet through the net. They took the least rusted of the guns and filled the small gap. They could hold out there until they collapsed, or the net gave.

They wasted several quarts of water in vain attempts to drink. Then they gave it up. The final irony of it made Tex laugh.

"Here we are, being noble till it hurts, and it won't matter a damn. The Skipper was right. It's the rust that'll lose us Venus in the end--that, and these Dry Spots."

Food made thirst greater. They stopped eating. They became mere skeletons, moving feebly in sweat-box heat. Breska stopped coughing.

"It's breathing dry air," he said, in a croaking whisper. "It's so funny I could laugh."

A scarlet beetle crawled over Tex's face where he lay beside the Martian on the catwalk. He brushed it off, dragging weak fingers across his forehead. His skin was dry, but not as dry as he remembered it after windy days on the prairie.

"Funny it hasn't taken more oil out of my skin." He struggled suddenly to a sitting position. "Oil!

It might work. Oh, God, let it work! It must!"

Breska stared at him out of sunken eyes as he half fell down the steps. Then a sound overhead brought the Martian's gaze upward.

"A scout, Tex! They'll attack!"

Tex didn't hear him. His whole being was centered on one thing--the thing that would mean the difference between life and death.

Dimly, as he staggered into the room where the oil was kept, Tex heard a growing thunder of wings. He groaned. If Breska could only hold out for a moment.

It took all his strength to turn the spigot of the oil drum. It was empty. All the stuff had been used to burn bodies. Almost crying, Tex crawled to the next one, and the next. It was the fourth drum that yielded black, viscous fluid.

Forcing stiff lips apart, Tex drank.

If there'd been anything in him, he'd have vomited. The vile stuff coated lips, tongue, throat. Outside, Breska's gun cut in sharply. Tex dragged himself to the water tank.

"Running water," he thought. Tilting his head up under the spigot, he turned the tap. Water splashed out. Some of it hit his skin and vanished. But the rest ran down his oil-filmed throat. He felt it, warm and brackish and wonderful, in his stomach.

He laughed, and let go a cracked rebel yell. Then he turned and lurched back outside, toward the steps.

The net sagged to the weight of white-haired warriors and roaring lizards. Breska's gun choked and stammered into silence. Tex groaned in utter agony.

It was too late. The rust had beaten them.

His freckled, oil-smeared face tightened grimly. Drawing his gun, he charged the steps.

"Where the hell did you go?" snarled Breska. "The ammo belt

jammed." He grabbed for the other gun set in the narrow gap.

Then it wasn't rust! And Tex realized something else. There were no rust flakes falling from the net.

Something had stopped the rusting. Before, his physical anguish had been too great for him to see that the net strands grew no thinner, the gun-barrels no rustier.

Scraps of the explanation shot through Tex's mind. Breska's cough stopping because the air was dried before it reached his lungs. Dry stone. Dry clothing.

Dry metal! The water-eating organisms kept the surface dry. There could be no rust.

"We've licked 'em, Breska! By God, we've licked 'em!" He shouldered the Martian out of the way, gripped the triggers of the gun. Shouting over the din, he told Breska how to drink, sent him lurching down the steps. He could hold the gap for a few minutes.

Looking up, Tex found her, swooping low over the fight, her silver hair flying in the wind. Tex shouted at her.

"You did it! You outsmarted yourself, lady. You showed us the way!"

Scientists could find out how to harness to Dry Spots to keep off the rust, and still let the

soldiers drink.

And some day the swamps would be drained, and men and women would find new wealth, new life, new horizons here on Jupiter.

Breska came back, grinning, and fought the jam out of the gun. White bodies began to pile up, mixed with the saurian carcasses of their war-dogs. And presently the notes of the war-chief's horn drifted down, and the attackers faded back into the swamps.

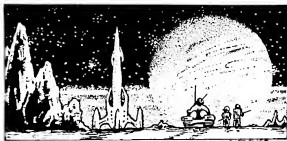
And suddenly, wheeling her mount away from the others, the warrior woman swooped low over the parapet. Tex held his fire. For a moment he thought she was going to dash her lizard into them. Then, at the last second, she pulled him up in a thundering climb.

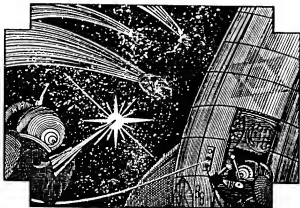
Her face was a cut-pearl mask of fury, but her pale-green eyes held doubt, the beginning of an awed fear. Then she was gone, bent low over her mount, her silver hair hiding her face.

Breska watched her go. "For Mars," he said softly. Then, pounding Tex on the chest until he winced.

Two voices, cracked, harsh, and unmusical, drifted after the retreating form of the white-haired war-chief.

"Oh, bury us not on the lone prairie-e-e . . ."





BEYOND THE WORLDS WE KNOW (PART I)

by Lin Carter

1. A Call for Help

The dusky purple sky of Mars was suddenly split asunder by an arc of dazzling white fire, which split the dark firmament from zenith to nadir. This streak of atomic flame sped towards a range of low, worn, incredibly ancient mountains in the southern hemisphere of the Red Planet, and the trim little speedster whose rocket drive was the cause of that fiery wake settled down to rest on the top of one of these eminences--Mount Mern, in the Ygnarth region of the Drylands of Cotaspar.

The airlock slid open and two men in protective suits, their faces shielded by airmasks, emerged into view. One was obviously an Earthling, tall, rangy, long-legged, with a fiery thatch of red hair and mischievous green eyes that sparkled with irrepressible humor in a handsome, tanned, clean-shaven face. The other was a Venusian, from his lithe and limber, almost boneless grace of movement, bald hairless pate, slanted albino-pink eyes, and dead-white skin.

The two trudged across the plateau, space-boots squealing and crunching in the thin layer of rock

dust that overlay the age-old stone, flogged on by icy gusts of gaspingly thin but breathable air. They approached a domelike structure of dark, gloomy basalt. It was ages older than the Great Pyramid of Cheops, that massive dome; aeons more ancient than the very cornerstone of Babylon. For Mars was . . . old . . . and the lurking remnants of her once-glorious civilization which she still nurtured at her shrivelled breast had origins so anterior in time as to dwell in the shadowlands of myth . . .

The bitterly cold, desiccated wind drove a swirl of talcum-fine rock dust rattling against the faceplate of his airmask, and Phath, the Venusian, started irritably and muttered a curse to his Swamp Country god. He was used to the dank climate of his muddy world, with its fetid bogs and clinging mists and bubbling fens, and this bone-dry, withered old dustball of a world ran against his grain.

"Cursed if I can see why we had to travel all the way to this miserable excuse for a planet, when the old crackpot could have told us what his trouble was on the televisor," grumbled Phath, wiping his faceplate clear.

His redheaded companion shrugged carelessly. "Dr. Zoar will have his own reasons, and they'll be good ones," observed the space-adventurer known only as 'Star Pirate.' "Just be patient, and we'll soon know. Besides, if we hadn't come, we'd be missing out on the swell Martian brandy the Doc usually serves us, not to mention those fried canal-mushroom filets--"

Phath muttered something disparaging on the question of Martian cuisine, but then the great door loomed up before them. The massive slab of wood wherefrom it had been anciently fabricated was so old that it had become petrified into stone over the ages, and it bore the bronze sigil of twin interlaced crescents that denoted the structure as a monastery dedicated to the Moon Gods. That had been long ago, and within the memory of living men the old edifice had served the reclusive savant and master-scientist, Zoar, as his hermitage and laboratory.

It was Zoar himself, and not one of his robot servitors, who answered the door. He was squat, diminutive, little more than a dwarf, with a bald, wrinkled skull and an ugly, froglike face, which wore a scowl that seemed permanently grafted upon his leathery, green-skinned face. It amused his warped sense of humor to assume the dusty dark-red robes and scuffing sandals of the long-extinct Moon Priests who had once haunted the drafty, echoing halls of what was now his sanctuary.

"Ah, it's you at last, my boy!" he croaked, peering up into Star's grinning face. Then his tones turned surly and his expression sour as he spied Phath lurking in the background.

"Brought your web-footed flunky along with you, eh?" he demanded with a sneer. "I thought the air rather savored of swamp-slime when I opened the door--"

Phath flushed--as much as his

chalk-white skin could flush--and his pink eyes narrowed to dangerous slits, one hand fondling the worn butt of his proton-needle in its leathern holster slung at his lean hip. "Why, you lice-ridden old sand-rat, I've half a mind to feed you a pint or two of your own desert-dust--!"

"If you actually had half a mind," snarled the savant with a savage smirk, "then you'd only be a cretin, not the perambulating two-legged amoeba you are now!"

"Is that so, you crawling sand-lizard," Phath spat venomously. "Well, scuttle into your nearest sewer-hole, 'cause I've a needler here just aching to broil one more slithering bit of Martian vermin!"

"Boys, boys!" sighed Star, but he knew it was no use. The two had a feud going for many years, and both obviously enjoyed it too much to be mollified by any words of his. Philosophically, he sat down on a stone bench to wait out the exchange of vituperation.

No Martian does any sort of business until after the guest-feast, but in the case of Dr. Zoar, a bachelor who tended for himself, the custom was observed only cursorily.

So swallowing their impatience to discover what had impelled him to call for their help, Star and the Venusian sat down to a repast of pale gold Drylands wine, succulent native fruits which savored of cinnamon, a pungent native cheese, broiled sandcat sausages, and that delight of gourmets the System over which Star had mentioned earlier, juicy slices of canal-pod mushrooms sizzled in small coppery skillets, ripe with spicy sauce.

Over a mellow, ancient Martian brandy with a heart of liquid golden fire, they talked, the meal concluded.

"You called for our help, but nothing seems to be wrong here on Mount Mern--"

"Your assistance, rather than

help," the old scientist corrected him sharply. "I have an undertaking in mind, an expedition, for which I require the strength, agility, courage and fighting skills of yourself and--um!--this mud-dweller you call your sidekick."

Then, before Phath could rise to the bait and begin to spar once more with words, the old Martian savant unfolded before the two adventurers an astounding tale.

2. A Brand New World

"You recall when you were on your way to Mercury a while back, on that nasty Fire Troll business," said Zoar, "I told you of my observations with the gravitometer--my own small invention," he added with a self-deprecating little cough which fooled no one. "I believe I told you then that I had discovered the cause of those mysterious perturbations in the orbit of the planet Pluto which have baffled every astronomer since the immortal Tombaugh discovered the ninth world from the sun . . . and that my calculations proved the long-suspected existence of a tenth world from the sun, that elusive will-o'-the-wisp, the legendary planet 'Persephone.'"

"Why, sure, Doc, I remember you said something--"

"Since then," continued Dr. Zoar, serenely riding over Star Pirate's interjection as if he had not even heard it, "since then, I have completed my calculations to a nicety. Once I had managed to pinpoint the periodicity of the perturbations in the orbit of Pluto (no mean feat in itself, I assure you, lad!), I had to prove it with hard mathematics. I employed three drone-ships, widely spaced, to take further readings and thus obtained a fix on the mystery planet. Once I had taken the parallax, it was child's play to feed the computer with the math and derive the precise

location of this new world in space. As soon as the computer has finished its purely routine calculations, we will have the entire orbit of the tenth world--Persephone, if you will--charted to a degree of exactitude that should satisfy those jealous scoffers"--here the Martian savant was apparently referring to his fellow scientists--"but one last proof is needed, before I will be completely satisfied."

Star was impressed, and said as much. "Terrific job, Doc! It'll put you right up there next to Herschel and Tombaugh and the rest, but . . ."

"But what do we have to do with all this?" muttered Phath, virtually stealing the very words from Star's mouth.

"Tut, isn't it obvious?" purred the green dwarf in self-satisfied tones. "Having discovered the tenth planet, do you dare to dream I would leave the glory of actually exploring it to someone else? I need your help, lad, in getting to Persephone in your little craft, the Jolly Roger!"

They looked at each other blankly, then turned to regard the little savant, who sat there smiling a smug little smile and sipping his mellow brandy contentedly.

"But, Doc, the Roger's no expeditionary craft--just a scout--a speedster! We--" began Star Pirate, but then his Venusian comrade interrupted with an ejaculation.

"Yakdar's tungsten tonsils! Just how far away is this-here Persephone, anyway?"

Still smiling smugly, Dr. Zoar named a distance so staggering that it made them gasp.

"B-but, Doc," said Star Pirate helplessly, "that's nearly as far from Pluto as Pluto itself is from the sun! The Jolly Roger would take many many weeks--months--why, even if we reprocessed every atom of air, every molecule of water

through the purifiers, we still couldn't possibly carry enough food for the three of us to last for a voyage as long as the one you contemplate. We'd starve to death before we even got there!"

"Not if you flew fast enough," said Zoar cunningly.

Once again the two adventurers exchanged a blank look, one with the other.

"Listen, Mars-man," snapped Phath huffily. "The Roger's just about the fastest thing in space as it is--how could we make 'er any faster than she is?"

"There are, ah, certain techniques," chuckled Zoar. He was in a rare good humor, and it was obvious that he hugged some secret to his bosom. "Now," Zoar said, "let me put a question to you. To both of you--if there were a way by which your little craft could attain to a velocity enormously superior to that which she can now attain--to a velocity still, of course, below light speed, but only fractionally so--which would mean that your voyage to Persephone would take not a year or so, not even months, but days or merely a couple of weeks--which is well within your ship's capacity to carry food supplies--would you make the trip?"

The challenge hung there in the dim air of the huge, dusty stone room. A chemical fire crawled and crackled on the grate. Huge shadows slithered overhead to the serpentine writhings of the eerie green flames. Phath methodically downed the last scrap of sandcat sausage and bit into one of the queer, spicy Dryland fruits that stood in a bowl of polished stone on the tabouret.

His weird pink eyes swivelled sideways to fix on Star's bronzed face. The adventurer's expression was rapt, his eyes filled with hazy dreams.

"Well, chief?" drawled the Venusian around another mouthful of the Martian fruit. "What do you say?"

"A brand new world," Star Pirate

whispered, caught in a net of dreams. "To go where no other man has ever set foot before you ... a whole world of wonders unguessed at, marvels unknown . . ."

No further words were needed. Phath sighed, shook his head philosophically, and poured another slug of the superb old Martian brandy into a small goblet hewn from rock-crystal.

Zoar smiled his wrinkled, froggish smile, hooded cold black eyes unblinking.

Star Pirate dreamed . . . the same dream that once stirred the hearts of the Vikings, of Marco Polo, of Columbus, Scott, Amundsen, and Neil Armstrong.

A brand new world . . .

3. "Into the Unknown--!"

Deep in that whirling wilderness choked with shattered moonlets and meteors known as the Asteroid Belt, lies a hidden little world that serves Star Pirate and his Venusian comrade as their secret hideout. Haven they call it, and a safer haven would be hard to imagine. While its core of heavy metals provides mass enough to afford a gravity field strong enough to hold breathable atmosphere and moisture to the surface of the miniature world, it is protected from chance discovery or the invasion of enemies by its peculiar location. For it lies at the heart of a swirling vortex of meteor swarms which would be swift and sudden death to any ship of space ignorant of the secret of safe passage through the storm of frozen, flying stone--a passage Star has charted and which he and Phath alone can follow.

The odd-shaped, lopsided little worldlet lies warm and humid, bathed in faint ochre Jupiter-light, dim and filled with shadows. Great shelves of stone lift against the glittering stars, mantled with strange pale tree-like growths,

their rock surfaces sheathed with satiny moss. Small beetle-like creatures scuttle between the crumbling ruins of a time-lost people--the enigmatic monuments of Aster, the planet-culture destroyed when the Lost Planet itself was torn asunder in time's dawn as the last act of an ancient tug-of-war between the gravitational fields of the sun and the giant planet Jupiter. Which resultant destruction of the lost planet, Aster, gave birth to the scattered fragments and moonlets which comprise the Asteroid Belt . . . or so went the theory current in Star Pirate's day.

Here rose the low, shallow dome of transparent metal that was house and home, laboratory and workshop, to Star and his Venusian sidekick. Their home was one vast, dome-roofed room, with folding screens and draw-curtains affording privacy. Galley and pantry and stores were here; bath facilities over there; Star's bunk and bureau to the side; the laboratory beyond the living area, where (anachronism of all anachronisms!) a fireplace built of rugged fieldstone towered, with a wood-fire roaring on the grate, and thick, overstuffed chairs drawn up before the hearth.

"An expensive luxury," murmured Zoar, craning his neck and trying to see how Star and Phath got rid of the smoke.

"Never mind that, right now," said the redheaded adventurer, grimly, "you said you needed our robot workshop facilities to install this new super-drive of yours in our ship, so let me show you what we've got."

"That was why you couldn't tell us all this stuff over the televisor, right?" guessed Phath shrewdly. "Even our multiwave set could be tapped, right? You didn't want others to know about this super-drive of yours, because the military types, the governments, the fanatical political groups, revolutionaries--?"

Zoar eyed the Venusian with a strange respect in his eyes. It was there for only a flicker of time, then veiled behind a forced sneer--but while it had lasted, it had been sincere enough.

"A lucky guess, mud-eater," he growled in his hoarse, bullfrog voice. "But there is something to what you say, yes. The political, economic and military implications of my super-drive (as you persist in calling it) are indeed such as to make it worth our while keeping it undercover. And, as your swamp-lizard friend says, lad, any communication system can be cracked, any code deciphered. And while nobody very much cares about the discovery of a new trans-Plutonian planet (what's one more ball of methane ice, after all, washed by sluggish seas of half-gelid ammonia and whipped by merciless hurricanes of hydrogen-snow?), a space-drive that is only a fraction from the velocity of light is very interesting, no? Now, I'd like to see this robot workshop of yours."

Later, after one of Phath's finest culinary efforts (he had deliberately concocted a dinner from the haute cuisine of his native world, by way of politely thumbing his nose at their Martian guest--a meal which began with swamp-cucumber soup, toasted ground-nuts, mud-lizard chopped liver pate, topped with flank of tree-dwelling snake in snail sauce), they dawdled over coffee and liqueurs before the roaring hearth of Star's determinedly anachronistic fireplace, studying the plans of the super-drive.

"I just don't see what makes it work!" confessed Phath in bewilderment. "Where does all that power come from?"

In rare good humor, despite the sordidly Venusian (and therefore swampy) meal, Zoar could not help chortling.

"That is the idea, friend Phath," he chuckled. "Where does a ray

of light go, when it has gone past you?"

The Venusian shrugged. "To the ends of the universe, I guess."

"Ah! But the universe has no ends; space is curved; a ray of light bends back upon the space it has already traversed--and does so endlessly," said the savant.

"So?"

"So every cubic foot of space is, at every split-second of time, filled with a flux of radiant energy that has been traveling through curved space from the Big Bang until now. It only has to be tapped to be used . . . and the energy thus tapped is truly infinite," Zoar said.

"Which implies that, with a truly infinite source of energy upon which to draw, you can construct a space-drive that will give you enough thrust to--almost--achieve the speed of light," said Star Pirate.

"Precisely," chuckled Zoar. "The only barrier to speed is enough energy to achieve it. With my super-drive (abominable term, but I fear we're stuck with it!) we have the energy. And will have all the speed we need. Trust me, boy . . . and, by the way, that deduction was very clever of you. Whoever was your teacher?"

Star grinned, white teeth flashing in his space-tanned face.

"You were, you old fraud!"

"Why, bless my soul, so I was!" snickered Zoar, enjoying himself immensely. He wriggled bare toes in his sandals, where his feet were propped up and toasting before the fire, and took another sip of Star's best brandy. It wasn't quite as fine as his Dustlands Golden, but it would do in a pinch, he thought to himself.

Phath was staring moodily into the depths of the blaze, pink eyes veiled and brooding. "Any problem?" inquired Star, noticing his sidekick's gloomy mood.

Phath roused himself with a shudder and a bit of a shiver. "No,

chief, nothing--really! It's just . . . you say the robot workshop will take about a week to outfit the Roger with Zoar's new drive, and then we'll be ready to go . . . into the unknown--!"

"That's right," nodded Star, unconcernedly. But the words reverberated in his mind long after he had bade his friends goodnight and had gone off to seek his bunk. Over and over they echoed through his dreams that night, and for nights thereafter.

"Into the unknown--!"

4. The Space-Storm

The Jolly Roger climbed skyward on a pillar of atomic fire. Far below, the twilit surface of Haven dwindled and was lost amidst the whirling storm of meteors which surrounded the little moonlet like some protective moat. Star switched to the computer pilot, and let the trim little speedster steer herself through the barrier of spinning chunks of frozen rock, guided by the coded radio signals broadcast from beacons planted amidst the swarm.

For two weeks the robot workshops underneath the dome-dwelling had toiled around the clock, as automata refitted the little scoutcraft with the outsized rocket-tubes of Dr. Zoar's design. Now the speedster looked clumsy and unbalanced with the heavy cluster of tubes at its stern, but Star was more than willing to trade aesthetics for a drive that would carry them to Pluto--and beyond--at the colossal speeds the diminutive Martian savant had promised.

The little craft dipped far below the plane of the ecliptic, so as to be in clear space, uncluttered by asteroid fragments and wandering meteorites, and before very long they had traveled on conventional drive far enough for Zoar to cut in his super-drive.

The moment was a tense one: within seconds, weeks of labor might prove to have been wasted on a flawed theory, a faulty plan. Zoar wrinkled his brow in a hideous scowl, as if daring the new engines to fail to fire. Star looked serious, concerned, but, as for the Venusian, he maintained the skepticism he had evinced ever since first hearing of the newfangled system of propulsion.

"Bet you my new gunbelt and holsters the gadget blows a fuse," Phath hissed to the redhead--just loud enough for the Martian scientist to hear. Zoar scowled even more ferociously, and thumbed the activator. A deep-throated resonance entered into the drumming song of the roaring rockets, but there was no other change. Beyond the televisior screens, stars glittered against the ebon backdrop of space like sequins sewn upon the velvet curtains of some enormous theatre.

"I told you--!" chortled Phath; even Star looked puzzled and dubious; but, as for Zoar, he only smirked and indicated the fancy new velocitometer attached to the control board. The two adventurers bent to study the dial . . . and saw that already the ship's speed had gone off the conventional velocitometer and they were traveling at speeds hitherto undreamed of.

"Yaklar's . . . tungsten . . . tonsils!" gasped the Venusian, his pink eyes widening. Such speeds were phenomenal. "Why don't we--feel the difference in speed?" he blurted, mystified.

"Because of my new stasis field, of course, simpleton!" snarled Zoar. "Its field of force cradles each sub-atomic particle in a cushioning web of force . . . otherwise, our velocity would wreck the ship's internal structure, and we would be plastered all over the walls."

"Well, I'll be a--a--" stammered the Venusian, for once at a lack for words. Zoar grinned malignantly, preening.

"If you need an appropriate epithet, friend Phath," he growled in his bass tones, "I believe I can supply a few--?"

A brief exchange of insults ensued, as usual. Sighing, Star Pirate left the control room in Phath's charge and went into his cabin to store away his luggage. It seemed the little argument soon fizzled out, for the next time he passed the entrance to the control room, Phath was stretched out in the big chair, plucking on his Venusian guitar and singing an old space-chanty in his soft, sibilant voice:

Oh, I'm only a wand'ring spaceman
With no world to call my home--
Though I've seen each moon and planet
I still like best to roam--

Now, I've got a gal on Venus
With webs between her toes
And I've got a Martian sweetie
I call my desert rose--

But my heart belongs to one
Who is my Jovian cutie--

and in the next instant, Phath choked off his song with a squawk of dismay as the Jolly Roger shuddered underfoot and the alarms began to clamor.

"A space-storm, chief!" yelled the Venusian. "And we're hulled by a meteorite--"

5. Adrift in Space

Star snapped a curse to every space god he knew, and sprang to the emergency override controls. Already, the craft was losing air in an ear-splitting shriek through the punctured hull, and it was becoming swiftly more and more difficult to draw breath. Star spun a wheel and slammed a lever home; air-tight emergency compartment doors slid out of the walls to seal off the danger area. Fortunately, it was back in the tail compartment

where the store rooms were located.

"How in the name of thirty space-devils did we run into a meteor storm here, below the ecliptic?" demanded Phath, switching the controls to manual and sending the Jolly Roger arching through the void in a steep curve designed to carry the trim little craft out of the path of the storm of hurtling rock and ice.

"More to the point, why didn't our repeller fields stop the meteorite before it hulled us?" said Star flatly, scanning the dials. Fortunately for their mission, remarkably little damage had been done, although they were not yet out of the path of danger.

"I think I can answer that one, my boy," said Dr. Zoar, waddling into the control room. He had been lying down in his bunk catching a well-deserved nap, until the clangor of the alarms had roused him from his rest. "It's the new drive--we're traveling so fast, the meteor went right through the repeller fields before they had time to deflect it."

He scratched his chin reflectively. "If travel by my super-drive should ever become common, we shall have to do something to beef up the standard repeller field generators . . . a pretty little problem, by the Twin Moons! I suppose we could use an overlapping, heterodyning electromagnetic barrier with . . ." His voice trailed off into an indistinguishable mumble as he became lost between equations.

"Yeah?" queried Phath in startled tones. "Well, we're not goin' so fast now, you Martian hop-toad! In fact, we're losing velocity rapidly. That new thingummy of yours has blown a fuse or something--"

Star sprang to the control board to study the new velocitometer. With a sinking heart he saw that Phath spoke the truth--the super-drive was no longer functioning, and the impact of being hulled had slowed the craft until she was vir-

tually adrift. He jiggled the controls, but could not spark the new rocket-tubes into roaring life--neither did the conventional drive work.

"Looks like that blasted meteor did more than just cost us a little air, chief," muttered the Venusian. Star looked grim.

"It must have severed some of the wiring that runs through the hollow hull," he said tensely. "We can't get at the conduits from inside; break out the suits, Phath. We'll have to go outside to repair the damage--where are we exactly, Doc?"

Zoar scrutinized the dials. "Just passing Jupiter's orbit," said the little scientist. "Luckily, we're too low on the ecliptic to have a chance of getting pulled in by Jupiter's gravitational field. Or Saturn's either, for that matter."

Once they had suited up and snapped shut their faceplates, the two adventurers went through the tail airlock and clambered out on the hull, tethered to the safety of the ship by their spacelines and gripping the outer hull with their magnetic space-boots. They left the navigation to the tender mercies of Dr. Zoar; while the green-skinned dwarf was no space-pilot--and certainly not in a class with Star Pirate or his Venusian sidekick--the little scientist could operate the controls of a space rocket if necessary.

Time crawled past, slow minute by minute, as the tall redhead and his pale-skinned comrad toiled at repairing the control circuits, which had been severed by the meteorite. Within the cabin, Zoar watched as the ship--now helplessly adrift in space and unable to control her flight--floated past the orbit of Jupiter and began to approach that of the other giant planet, Saturn. The ringed planet loomed dead ahead, or so it seemed in the screens, and the diminutive

scientist began to find the odd difference in perspective alarming.

Finally, he called Star Pirate and Phath on the ship-to-suit intercom circuit.

"What's up, Doc?" inquired the redhead. Zoar groused and grumbled, then admitted--

"We're drifting above our former position, lad, and reentering the plane of the ecliptic again. I have no doubt that this is the result of the gravitational fields of the nine moons of Saturn."

"In other words, we're drifting into danger, you think?" asked Star Pirate.

"Well . . . it is possible," said Zoar. "We still have a very long way to go before we are in any immediate and genuine danger, but still . . . how are you two lads coming with the repairs on the severed control circuits?"

Star Pirate's voice was heavy and grim. "Did you ever try to do any delicate repair-work, while wearing clumsy space-mittens, Doc?" he asked.

"Fortunately, no, never . . ."

"Well, then, all I can say is--we're working as fast as we can, but it's a tough job. Keep on the screens, and give us plenty of warning when we are really drifting into danger."

Zoar agreed, switched off the communicator, and returned to his post before the control board. And the minutes crawled by, and the hours. From time to time, worn out and in need of food and drink and rest, Star or the Venusian clambered back into the Jolly Roger for a breather, but not for long. There was a job to do--a job that must be done--and there were only the two of them to do it.

And in the forefront of Star Pirate's mind was a danger of which neither Phath nor Dr. Zoar had apparently recollected, as yet. He hoped it would not be needful to speak of it, but only time would tell.

It was some two days later, and all three of the adventurers were at the end of their endurance, to say nothing of their patience. The repairs were still advancing, but slower than Star could have wished . . . when the danger he had feared struck suddenly and without the slightest warning.

The redheaded adventurer and his Venusian sidekick were on the outside of the hull, relaying the damaged circuits with fresh lines, when the ship-to-suit intercom crackled into life.

"Lad! Lad! We're in the grip of some sort of turbulence--no idea just what--but the craft is being sucked into a mid-region between Saturn and Jupiter, where there seems to be a stationary meteor-swarm, or what appears to be that, at least in the 'scopes," came Zoar's voice, crackling with excitement.

Star stiffened: what he had been dreading was about to come true. He looked up to see the puzzled expression on the white-skinned face of his Venusian friend.

"Turbulence," chief? What sort of turbulence could there be in space?" murmured Phath bewilderedly.

Star tightened his lean jaw tensely.

"You've forgotten the Vortex," he said tonelessly.

Phath's pink eyes blinked--then widened. They were shadowed with a faint and ominous premonition.

"Swamp-devils of Venus! You're right, chief! Yaklar help us all--the Vortex!"

6. Vortex of Doom

Both men had forgotten that their suit radios were still switched on, and that Dr. Zoar could hear every word they spoke to each other. His puzzled voice came rasping through the crackle of cosmic-ray static.

"Vortex? What Vortex, my boy?

Unless you mean that old space legend . . . the Sargasso of Space . . . the graveyard of lost ships . . . but surely--"

"It's no legend, Doc, believe me," grated Star Pirate in ringing tones. "I've not only seen the swarm of lost rockets drifting forever at the heart of the Vortex, but I almost got caught up in the gravity tides on the edge of the Vortex once, years ago."

Phath stared at him blankly, and Star Pirate forced a mirthless chuckle to his lips.

"That was before you joined forces with me," he remarked. "And how I could have used you at my side that day!" His memory hearkened back to days and nights of ceaseless toil, without sleep, food and water and even his supplies of air running low, as he had battled the remorseless suction of the gravity tides that had been pulling the Jolly Roger deeper and deeper into the tangle of dead, long-deserted and abandoned space vessels at the Vortex's mysterious heart.

"But, lad--!" protested the Martian. Star swiftly shrugged off his dreamful mood of recollection of those desperate days and nights when he had labored to repair his wrecked rocket engines in time to break free of the whirlpool of gravity.

"It's midway between the two giant planets, Jupiter and Saturn, Doc," he said swiftly. "Gravity plays strange tricks out there, where two massive gravity-fields interlock and battle in a ceaseless tug of war, complicated by the ever-changing gravity flux of the many moons of the two huge worlds. A sort of vortex of gravitation that traps unwary ships and pulls them in to the center, where they can never break free. I saw ships in there near the center that belonged to museums--stuff I'd only seen in the history books--but we've got to get finished with repairing

the control circuits, without delay. You keep watch over the meters and give me the readings every quarter hour, so I'll know how fast we're drifting into the Vortex. I'll keep working out here as long as I can still stand up and stay awake--"

And the tall redhead bent to his work again, striving to drive every thought from his mind except that of the task before him.

"Holy space-devils, chief, the Sargasso of Space!" whispered Phath, his sibilant tones touched with awe. "I thought it was just another old space-legend myself . . . and now we're caught up in it and every minute, every hour, being drawn deeper and deeper into the graveyard of lost ships . . ."

"Less talk and more work," grated Star Pirate harshly.

Phath nodded, and the two of them bent to their toil under the cold and mocking gaze of the uncaring stars.

Like a chip of wood caught in a whirlpool, the Jolly Roger was drawn by the inexorable gravity tides deeper and deeper in the Vortex--into that weird region of space known as 'the Sargasso of Space.'

Around and around the outer perimeter of the Vortex drifted the trim little speedster, helpless to break the tangible but unseen bonds of force that drew her ever nearer to the center of the mysterious Sargasso, where old, antiquated ships clung together, inhabited only by their ancient dead.

It was an eerie scene, and aroused uncanny emotions in the breast of Dr. Zoar as he stood by the controls of the little scout craft, monitoring her driftage deeper and deeper into the toils of the deadly Vortex. As the 'scope centered upon the tangle of broken, lost rocket ships at the core of the whirlpool of invisible force, a grim shudder ran over the diminutive frame of the old Martian savant,

and a grim, bleak light shone in his cold black eyes.

For one question lacerated his heart and haunted his unresting brain--could the little scout, even augmented enormously in power by the addition of the super-drive, break free of the insidious grip of the Vortex?

It was a question to which even Dr. Zoar did not possess an answer . . .

Suddenly, the etherphone crackled with an incoming message from outside the hull. It was Star Pirate's voice--raw with strain, hoarse with fatigue, but ringing with jubilation.

"Got 'er patched up at last, Doc! Hold the fort--Phath and I are coming inside for a bit of a rest. Got any hot soup, some biscuits and cheese? I haven't eaten for so long, my belly thinks my mouth's sewn up--"

Zoar uttered his rasping chuckle, and scurried into the cramped little galley of the Jolly Roger. It hadn't been very much of a jest, heaven knew, but it did the little scientist good to learn that the tall redheaded adventurer could still make a joke, bone-weary as he must be.

Moments later the airlock door wheezed open and magnetic space-boots clanked on the metal flooring. Their faces puffy and pale, eyes red-rimmed and bleary, Star Pirate and his Venusian sidekick unscrewed their space helmets and clambered out of the suits. The two did not need any invitation to dive into the hot, tasty little meal which Dr. Zoar had set out on the table which folded out from the wall. While they gobbled hungrily, the Martian set out a fat bottle of good strong wine and two goblets.

Pushing back his plate at last, Star Pirate heaved a sigh of repletion. "Gods of space, Doc, but that tasted good! What about it, Phath?" The Venusian burped, and patted his lips with his fingertips by way of apology.

"Any time you want to throw over this science game and become the Jolly Roger's short order cook, well, you've got me backin' your space-ticket," said Phath. Zoar stared at him, blinking with surprise. It was the closest thing to a compliment--or even a friendly remark--which the Venusian had ever made concerning Zoar, or, at least, within his hearing. The Martian felt mildly astonished--but then he wrote it off to the action of fatigue-poisons upon the mind.

"Before you two decide on desert and coffee," said the Martian sharply, "hadn't we better test the drive, to see if the circuits are repaired and workable after all?"

"Guess so," grunted Phath. Star Pirate looked grim, then gave a reluctant nod. They trooped into the control room and took their stations, while Phath assumed the controls.

At the first touch, the super-drive rocket-tubes coughed--then burst with a roar into blazing life!

Star Pirate yelled; Zoar broke into a grotesque, capering dance of joy; the Venusian laughed, cursed by his Swampland gods, and almost burst into tears.

Gradually, moment by moment, minute by minute, the trim little speedster began to fight her way out of the whirlpool of gravitational forces, bucking the current doggedly, battling the drag of electromagnetic attraction for the limitless freedom of open space.

Her powerful new drive-tubes proved--but by only a narrow margin!--stronger than the swirling tide of forces which had till then held her entrapped.

Within less than an hour the Jolly Roger was free of the Vortex and back on her original flight-plan, bound for the edge of the solar system, and whatever marvels and mysteries might lie beyond.

And the uncanny Sargasso of Space dwindled behind her as the little

scout-craft hurtled for the edge of the unknown. But only Dr. Zoar was aware of this--both Star Pirate and his Venusian comrade were stretched out in their bunks, blissfully enjoying the first decent sleep either of them had known for days.

7. The Rim of the Unknown

Day after day went by; hurtling at a velocity heretofore never achieved by a manned spacecraft, the trim little speedster edged past the orbit of giant Saturn, and past Uranus, and beyond Neptune. Ahead floated the ghostly pale globe of Pluto, for centuries thought to be the outermost planet of all the System.

Beyond lay the Unknown, into which the three men aboard the Jolly Roger would be the first to penetrate. It was a sobering thought.

Phath, however, seemed unmoved by it. By now well rested, and well fed, the Venusian lolled back in the capacious embrace of the pilot's chair, against the pneumatic cushions, and plucked with lazy fingers the twangling wires of his Venusian guitar.

Before long, he burst into not-particularly-melodious song. While Phath was a good man to have at your side in a back-alley brawl, or to man the guns in a space-battle, or to juggle the pots and pans in the galley, it must be admitted that singing was not among the several endeavors in which he excelled. In fact, quite the contrary.

Hearing his albino partner raise his voice in song, Star Pirate winced a little and headed aft to the engine room for a little peace and quiet among the drumming cyclotrons. Oblivious, Phath sang on--continuing the same space-chanty he had been carelessly yodelling only moments before they had been caught in the unexpected space-storm, and were hulled by the micro-meteorite.

Now, I've got a gal on Venus

With webs between her toes--

And I've got a Martian sweetie

I call my desert rose--

But my heart belongs to one

Who is my Jovian cutie--

Even her muscles have muscles,

And she sure ain't no beauty--

Star let the compartment door slide shut behind him, and sighed with heartfelt relief as the thunder of the atomic engines succeeded in drowning out the sound of Phath's tuneless space-chanty from the other end of the trim little speedster.

A small alarm trilled in Star Pirate's ear. The redheaded space adventurer gave a jaw-cracking yawn, stretched out his long, rangy legs, and blinked at the small illuminated chrono-dial sunk into the bulkhead wall at his eye-level. He had exactly twenty-four minutes before it was his turn to relieve Phath, who was on watch in the control room.

Generally speaking, Star and his Venusian sidekick never bothered to keep live watch over the ship's progress, leaving that to the robot pilot, whose super-keen electronic senses could easily and swiftly detect the approach or the presence of danger in plenty of time to awake the two. But here, at the very edge of the System, no one could guess what mysteries and perils lurked, and to keep live watch--although an irksome chore--seemed wise.

Star rose, splashed his face with stingingly cold water to rinse away the last clinging vestiges of sleep, slid his long legs into his drab gray zipper-suit, pulled on his boots, clasped his gunbelt around his lean hips, and sauntered forward.

He was not due to relieve his Venusian comrade for several minutes yet, but the redheaded space adventurer had set the alarm some several

minutes ahead deliberately. Avoiding the door which led into the control room, Star went up a steel ladder to the observation deck, where he found, much to his surprise, that he was not alone.

A hunched, diminutive, squat little figure stood before the huge circular porthole, staring out at the restless fire of the glittering stars, and at the wan and ghostly gray luminance that was the orb of frozen, lonely Pluto, here at the very edge of known space.

Dull Pluto-light glimmered on the wrinkled scalp of the bald head of the old Martian savant, who glanced up quizzically as Star came sauntering out of the shadows.

"You, too, eh lad?" muttered the scientist, edging to one side so as to make room at the huge circular window for the Earthling. "Come to say a last farewell to the inner worlds?"

Star shrugged, and gave a half-hearted grin.

"Something or other like that, Doc, I guess," the Earthling murmured. He stared out to where the huge globe of ghostly gray light that was Pluto floated beneath their soaring keel, accompanied by its twin moons, Oberon and Titania. He watched the blurred, featureless sphere drift by beneath them. No one lived down there on the surface of bleak, inhospitable Pluto, as he well knew. The continents of frozen methane drifted aimlessly over seas of liquid hydrogen in a frigid hell where even the toughest steel became so brittle a child could snap it between his fingers.

Only on the little astronomical observatory satellite, called Tom-baugh Station, did a crew of dedicated scientists and officers and men of the Space Patrol maintain the hegemony of human civilization, here at the very edge of known space.

Even as that thought was passing through Star Pirate's mind, he became aware that the trim little

speedster had passed beyond the orbit of Pluto--

Now that they had crossed over the Rim of the Unknown, they flew in trackless, unexplored space.

The Jolly Roger now blazed a trail where no other ship had ever gone before, in all the vast immensity of time . . .

As Star went down the steel ladder again, to relieve Phath on watch in the control room, the Venusian's voice was raised in careless and unmelodious song--

Even her muscles have muscles,

And she sure ain't no beauty--

She can pick me up and bounce me

Just like a rubber ball--

But though she's strong as strong can be,

I love her, after all--

For I'm just a wand'ring spaceman

Who wants a little love--

If I can't find it down on Earth,

I'll look for it above--

A slight, rueful smile touched the bronzed lips of the tall space adventurer as he strolled into the control cabin to relieve his albino comrade.

And he reflected, with just a touch of self-mockery in his thoughts, that while some men have at least a spark of poetry in their souls, others have a song on their lips.

It was quite a Universe!

You cannot afford to miss the second installment of this thrilling drama of peril and adventure in the mysterious depths of space, as Star Pirate and his little band of comrades dare the unknown marvels of the Tenth Planet, when "Beyond the Worlds We Know" is continued in the very next action-packed issue of ASTRO-ADVENTURES!

THE FIFTH SPACESUIT

by Charles Garofalo

When party time rolled around, Mather was dead tired. The day had been a round of not-so-petty disasters. A hose had broken in the air circulation system, and it had stubbornly refused to be fixed. Then, even before that repair could be effected, the force-field's power plant had shorted out again. As usual, it had taken hours of frantic searching and frustrating effort to find the short and fix that. Then, after that and the hose had finally been seen to, the food processor had needed to be cleaned. Sometimes Mather felt as if he was the only person doing anything aboard this ship.

He was dead tired, but he couldn't beg off the party. The little celebration was his idea to begin with, something--anything--to relieve the monotony. He'd gotten Captain Cleveland and everyone else all psyched up for it, and he had done his best to rig up some makeshift partying stuff; no way could he back off. Besides, he'd been looking forward to it ever since he'd had the idea.

All the duties had been put aside for this one affair, this makeshift little boredom-killer of Mather's. Only a really major disaster would call the crew of the Endeavor away from it.

He passed the tray of snacks around, to Captain Cleveland, Moriggi, Williams, Omanzy.

"Didn't think we'd even get a chance to have this thing, the way things were going. Hope nothing else goes wrong," Mather said casually. "At least not until we've each had our first drink.

"They used to sell chips like

these in the store when I was little," Mather said, passing the bowl around. "Made from the same dehydrated potatoes I used. Called them . . . Singles? . . . Shingles? . . . well, something like that. Glad that processor's so versatile. Wait till you taste the wine it's turned out. Never guess it was frozen concentrate a few hours back.

"Wasting supplies? Aw, whaddya mean, Moriggi? Come on. We have enough food left to last the five of us another year. If we're not picked up by then . . . hell, think of all the back pay and compensation!

"By the way, Williams, thanks for the loan of your tapes. A party just ain't the same without background music. Got a few tapes of my own for later if you're interested. No, not music. Real old classics . . . Edgar Allan Poe stories being read by Basil Rathbone, Peter Lorre, even Boris Karloff."

Mather made an extremely exaggerated grimace of disappointment at his comrade's unenthusiastic reaction to his offer.

"You guys just have no culture. Here I come up with some of the finest garbage ever put out and the best you can come up with is a blank stare? No imagination!"

He inclined toward Cleveland.

"A videotape of Star Trek? Sorry, sir, never thought to pack one. Have some of The Outer Limits back on Earth when we get back there."

Mather set his jaw stubbornly.

"Yes," he insisted, "when we get back. We will, you know. They'll come looking for us . . . any day. A rescue ship. Might even come tonight. Or next week.

Anyhow, as long as we work together, keep the air pumps working and the force-field up, we got a damn good chance.

"Four months? Hell, what's four months?" he argued. "It's not like all we've done is sit around and get bored. We've been too busy keeping this crate together to get bored. We got plenty of stuff around yet, books none of us have read, films none of us have seen, cassettes none of us have heard . . ."

"Yeah, I wish those assholes would hurry up and get us too, but the big thing is not to lose hope. Remember the *Ranger*? Fifteen months in the asteroid belt, but when they found 'em they got the whole crew out."

Mather preferred not to mention how the crew was half-starved when they found them and how several of them were now reportedly seeing psychiatrists twice a week.

"Anyway, I've got the distress call working a full twenty-four-hour shift . . . sooner or later they'll be coming."

Mather raised his glass.

"Gentleman, I give you a toast . . . to the United States Space Force!"

Captain Cleveland did not raise his glass, nor did any of the other crewmen. Nor did anyone criticize Mather for proposing the toast instead of letting the Captain do so. Then again, they hadn't said anything about his monopolizing the conversation, either.

Mather surveyed his four comrades. He did not seem to be aware that they were wearing spacesuits, their faces blurred and distorted by the darkened visors of their helmets. He had suited them up himself after the accident. He had not dared open an airlock to dispose of the bodies, not with the shape the ship was in. The visors concealed the blood around the eyes and mouth, the vacuum-bloated figures, the blasted, empty

expressions. And this way he could not see Cleveland's agonized expression, nor the long slashes he'd found across the Captain's wrists when he had finally made his way to the computer room.

It had taken a couple of months for him to forget that part of the accident, how only the computer area and the engine room where he'd been working had escaped depressurization. It was about that time Captain Cleveland and his mates had started to help him keep the damaged ship functioning, to talk to him, to keep him calm in the face of imminent death and crushing loneliness.

"Wish I hadn't mentioned Poe before," Mather thought aloud. "If he'd written science fiction, he might have come up with a situation like this one, five people trapped in a damaged ship and--"

He heard the first footstep. After a few seconds, another one, slowly approaching the room of the party.

But they were all here! Who? Not, surely not one of the bogeymen from pre-space fiction. The hostile alien, the monster, the space pirate, they were just running gags among astronauts. Plenty of dangers in space, but they weren't part of it. No, it had to be--

"Rescue!" he shrieked to his silent comrades. "Rescue! They've found us! They've come! We're saved! We're saved!"

But why was the rescuer--and there seemed to be only one--walking so slowly? Why was he feeling so cold and frightened? And why were the lights slowly dimming?

As the door opened, realization hit him:

The country ravaged by a virulent plague that brought quick and ugly death; the vacuum of space, horrible death for anyone caught in it unprotected.

The castle, sealed shut, the gates welded against the plague's entrance; the ship, sealed in a

force-field, the airlocks sealed shut to protect them.

The party, planned and celebrated to make them all forget the danger outside, obscene in its celebration and somehow blasphemous in its very purpose.

The fires in the braziers going out, the clock running down; the lights going out, the oxygen system failing, the whole ship falling apart.

The partyers in their masks/visors.

The final, unexpected guest, refusing to be balked and put off any longer, coming like a thief in the night to wreak final destruction . . .

The steps grew closer. Mather grabbed around for a weapon . . . his fist closed on a screwdriver.

Prince Prospero, dagger in hand . . .

Mather dropped the weapon. His rising terror somehow had engulfed itself, leaving him calm and resigned, almost . . . looking forward to what was to come.

A . . . man? . . . in a spacesuit

entered the room. The visor hid the stranger's face completely. Numbed, beyond terror, Mather faced him as the stranger slowly raised his visor.

They found Mather's body there with his comrades. Space's cold preserved it well, they could see, despite the bloodstains, the strange smile, the look of relief, as if in his final moments Mather realized his ordeal was at last over. They found enough to realize that for four months Mather had struggled valiantly to hold the damaged ship together singlehandedly, doing the work meant for five men. It was incredible he'd held out so long. Not that it had done him much good. The force-field had finally broken down; space had got him, even after the fight he'd put up.

They never quite figured out the party, however. Or why Mather's own spacesuit lay just out of his reach, shattered as if someone had just shrugged out of it and gone on his way.

THE RIENZA LECTURES

by Carl Jacobi

They rolled into Selfridge at five after midnight. This was the thirteenth, all averaging thirty thousand for some inexplicable reason, spared by the c. Six more to go. The street down which they drove was an opaque tunnel--no one had had the gumption to jury-rig the electric plant--with an occasional lanthorn gleaming forlornly before a doorway. Red turned at the first intersection, knowing that Joe would not operate on the main drag, and looked for the familiar phone booth with the red bull's-eye.

He covered three blocks of the deserted wholesale district before he muttered an oath of satisfaction. There it was! Good old Joe! Good screwy old Joe!

"Keep your eyes peeled," he said to the girl at his side. "If you see anyone, anything, sing out."

He got out of the rattletrap, crossed to the phone booth, looked at his watch and when it showed exactly 12:15, picked up the receiver.

"Joe?"

There was a moment's silence. Then a low-pitched brittle voice said, "Da da, dit dit--dit dit dit." Joe still thought of himself as an operator, a delusion which the Federal Restarium had been unable to insulin out of him. But the man in the phone booth knew that behind this facade of oddity lurked a razor mind that could probe almost any technological problem.

"Okay, Joe. Where are you?"

"Recognition, Illinois. Isn't that a helluva name for a town?"

"How was the road?"

Joe swore. "A disaster. I almost thought I couldn't make it."

Red got a cigarette out of his pocket, lit it and inhaled. "Septics?"

"I didn't see any."

"Okay," Red said. "Now what have you got lined up for us here in Selfridge?"

"It's a gasser. Go out 93 and turn left at County Road D, a mile from town . . . a big Roller Rink. The P.A. works neat as a pin. The lights too. I hooked up a dynamo from an abandoned hospital."

"Publicity?" Red asked.

"There's a hand-set weekly newspaper still being published, believe it or not. I got a column in that and a quarter-page ad. Also, had some handbills printed and a couple of dozen posters. The posters came out real nice."

"And overnight accommodations?" summed up Red.

"You'll have to sleep in your car. The whole town is a hotbed of suspicion. Hotels all closed, of course. There's a woman in the house across from the Rink will give you your meals. That's the best I could do."

"All right, Joe," Red said. "I'll call you from"--he hesitated over the name, smiling a little--"Recognition. Same deal. Same time."

"Da da, dit dit," Joe said, and the phone went dead. Red stood in the booth a moment, looking at his ghost in the glass. Then he returned to the rattletrap.

The waiting girl made no comment. She was half-drowsing, exhausted from the long hours on the tortuous road. Yet even in the dim light of the dash her aquiline face with its almost Romany cheek structure showed strength and determination.

She wore a black and white turban, pulled down low over her ears, and Red got the impression there was no hair underneath. He had met her in a bar on 314th Street. She said she was from Ramadan.

"That's a star," Red, who was sometimes surprised by his own supply of information, said.

"Well, really Orgora, a planet in the Ramadan galaxy. I'm working on my delevant."

A delevant, she said, was the equivalent of a doctorate. Hers was in socio-mechanics. "I'm here as part of a field project to aid in a readjustment of the aftermath." She opened her purse, took out a small vial and shook from it two yellow tablets.

"Go easy with that stuff," Red had warned. "If it's Zonc, it doesn't mix with the embalming fluid they serve here."

"Merely a radiation hypatre," she said. "It keeps me immune."

And that was when the first faint shadow of a plan flickered across Red's mind. He didn't believe the girl across the booth for sour apples but if she had a preventative, a panacea for the fallout, it might be worthwhile to give her a listen-to. Until now, immunity was held only by the Septics who took advantage of it like the burial platoons of England's fourteenth-century Black-Death.

"My name is Rienza," the girl said. "I'm lecturing in the hall next door."

Red looked at her appraisingly. "Lecturing on what?"

"On problems similar to yours and the success we achieved in combating them," she replied enigmatically.

Prompted by a rising curiosity, without anything to occupy his time at the moment, Red accompanied her to the adjoining building and took a seat in the rear of the hall. The place was crowded with people in every walk of life. The girl mounted the platform, waited for

quiet and in a melodious voice began to speak. Afterward, Red couldn't have told what she said. It was a lecture on many subjects. She began by compounding a rumor that there were other "islands" in the continental expanse, spared by the c., separated, marooned, minus all transcommunications, but waiting to be unified into a Garibaldi-like city-state as an initial move toward refederation. As matters stood, the living populace only existed, balancing between apathy and decay. Of course there was radiation, but it would pass. And out there was l'dresidere; she would see that it had rebirth, a way to glory and redemption.

Red's eyes took on a sudden gleam. Somewhere in his rat-like past he had heard of l'dresidere. It was a cache, a Monte Cristo, a Ninvalon, a St. Barsos Cabinet, but as yet only a nameless shadow in his time-locked memory. Monetary lust swept over him and the half-plan latent in his mind began to develop into a full-fledged scheme.

He broached it to the girl when the lecture was over and they were out on the lightless street.

"I've got a sidekick, a former advance man for a closed-circuit canny. You know, newspapers, billboards, spot announcements, tent-lots, the works. He's got a few offcenter cogs in his upstairs but it doesn't interfere with his ability. As for me, managing is my 'for-tay,' as the saying goes. I piloted Hammerblow McCoy to the top of the welterweights. Lecturing is the same kettle of fish. A little more finesse, that's all. You need someone to chart your course, take care of detail and trivia. What say we join forces? Joe and me do all the underside work, you the talking and we split three ways, right down the line."

She declined at first, politely but firmly. Then casually she began to ask questions. Slowly renewed interest entered her face. A gleam

rose into her eyes. She seemed to be reconsidering, weighing the pros and cons and she studied the man beside her carefully. Abruptly she nodded. "It's a deal," she said.

"Fine!" Red said. "You won't regret it. Now first off we'll need some of those tablets."

"I have plenty," the girl said.

So it came to be. In Stratmoor, in what was once Pennsylvania, everything went smooth as nylon. The second lecture was much the same as the first, informative, scholarly, encouraging. The audience, still in a state of recovery, filled every seat. The collection overflowed. Impatiently Red waited for mention again of l'dresidere but this time the girl avoided the subject.

Although he had seen devastation in two wars, conditions along Coast-to-Coast-1 appalled him. In places not a house or barn or tree had been left standing. The turnpike was like a great banjo with the concrete doubled upward, the seared patches like frets and the electric wires draped like strings. Here and there areas still exuded the smell of charred wood and wet stone. Not a squirrel, not a chipmunk revealed themselves but macabre flocks of crows swirled up before the rattletrap as Red had tooled around obstacle after obstacle.

Now, a mile out of Selfridge, he spotted the Roller Rink. The place looked like a summer bandstand, ablaze with lights, neon sign gleaming super-brightly in the enfolding darkness. Red drew up before the entrance. Inside, the wooden walls were decorated with garish poster drawings--more of Joe's accomplishments--of Rienza in various garbs and coiffeurs. The girl looked around the big undivided room.

"Is there a microphone?" she asked.

Red led the way to the lectern

Joe had supplied, pointed out the switch to her and turned it on. "Testing . . . one, two, three, four . . ." His nasal voice rang out, audible in every corner of the hall.

The next night that hall was filled to capacity. With all forms of diversion halted and the populace restless and fearstricken, it was natural that they should huddle in a group and listen to words of encouragement. Rienza came on slow as usual but gradually the hypnotic quality of her voice and personality probed into everyone who sat before her.

She spoke of the nineteen, named and located them. Where she had obtained this information Red didn't know. She talked of breakdown of government and society, a natural turn of affairs, she said, following the c. She talked of survival and sociological reincarnation. And she spoke of l'dresidere which she promised would lead who so desired into the future.

Red raked his hand through his copper-colored hair as he heard her approach the subject. And then all at once, like a flare of heat-lightning preceding a summer storm, he had it! It was--it must be--Central Project she was speaking of--Masterclock as it was known. Nothing else fitted her vague references.

Masterclock, one of the futile defense forerunners, had been rushed to near completion during the frenetic days that preceded the doom. The project had been the vote-getting toy of Senator Barton Bay Quire who was running on a fourth party ticket for Federation presidency. Housed in a slate heptagon somewhere south of Omaha--security kept the exact location vague--it was to be a mass turnstile into Time, a stepladder into what-was-to-be, an escape route for the demoralized populace. But it had come too late.

Next day they were on the road

again with conditions worsening the farther they went. The highway, littered with monstrous slabs of concrete, piled one on another, in places defied passage. The trail Joe had taken was clearly marked, however. Sticks with a wash of red paint stood at intervals at the shoulder's edge or off the road where the situation warranted it.

In places the bomb drops had been less accurate with less damage, and then Red sent the rattletrap barreling down the pavement with almost childish ebullience. He rolled down the window and inhaled great gusts of the cool spring air with full confidence in the powers of the yellow tablets. He felt as if he were leaving an old world and entering a new. And it was nice, having the girl at his side.

In the late afternoon he stopped suddenly along one of the detours and pointed across the fields at the horizon. A company of horse, twenty or thirty, led by a rider on an all-white mount, was heading west at a fast trot; they veered off to the north before any detail was discernible.

"Septics!" the girl said.

Red nodded. "They're pretty far from the nearest island."

All that day, until a lavender twilight enveloped them, Red drove with the unpleasant feeling that they were fleeing stags with the hunters not far behind. At dusk they came out on a high once-wooded spine and looked down upon an immobile segmented beetle—a train—with the diesel a twisted blackened mass of metal but with the coaches intact, strung along behind. He turned the rattletrap and headed for it.

A quarter of an hour later, the girl following, he went through coach after coach, surveying them carefully. He saw fused windows, blistered varnish, scorched upholstery but no real damage. There was no indication of what had happened to the passengers.

They slept that night in Pullman bunks, a luxury after the cramped rattletrap. But Red lay awake for hours. He thought of Rienza in the next coach, her lovely face and lovely figure and the fact that curiously no thought of sex had occurred to him. He realized that he understood her less than the night they had first met. An aura of oddity hung about her. At times she made strange references and allusions that swept by him completely. When he attempted to question her she answered him in parables.

He fell at length into a fitful slumber.

He awoke with a start to the sound of hoofbeats. He leaped from his bunk, ran to the vestibule and, careful not to be seen, looked out upon a group of milling horsemen, garbed in loose-flowing robes like burnouses and with their features hidden by antiseptic gauze masks. Each rider carried a pulse rifle. At the windows of one of the coaches their leader reined his white mount and peered within. He repeated the action with each coach.

Apparently satisfied that they were empty, he gave a signal and rode off.

Red made his way back through the train to the bunk occupied by Rienza. He found her awake and alarmed but calm. She held in her hand something he hadn't seen before, a small odd-shaped derringer with a funnel-like barrel.

"Go back to sleep," he said. "They're gone."

Why the next town-island, Olemly, should have been spared was, like its predecessors, a mystery. No river or hill or valley separated it. It lay like a collection of giant's toys, raw and exposed in the midst of the sunburnt prairie. All building windows on the south exposures were shattered but that was all. Buses and cars choked the streets where they had been

discarded for lack of fuel. With some difficulty Red found the pre-arranged phone booth. Joe's voice came on muffled and far-away. He sounded excited.

"Da da, dit dit dit," he said. "Someone else was on the wire ten minutes ago. I thought it was you and I guess I spilled plenty of beans."

"What did you say?" Red asked.

"Well, I mentioned the amount we've averaged at the lectures and I mentioned the site of the next. That's about all."

"That's enough," Red said gravely. "But it might have been someone who blundered into the booth by mistake. Where is the site?"

"Federal Hall, one block off the main stem. Maybe we'd better skip it this time."

"The hell we will!" Red snapped. "Nobody's going to cage me out of that collection."

Nor did they. The Olemly lecture went off without trouble and the audience was unusually responsive. Red counted fourteen hundred credits in the take. But he was taking no chances. He hustled Rienza out the rear door the moment her talk was completed and across the deserted parking lot to their rattletrap. Before taking off, he took a small vial from the front compartment, ran around to the back of the vehicle and emptied it in the tank. He roared out of the lot toward the cloverleaf that led to Coast-to-Coast-1.

For a time he thought he had been unnecessarily apprehensive. Then a big black fenderless Zalda materialized behind them. It came up fast.

Red swung into a detour, sent the rattletrap plunging down an incline, but the pursuing Zalda hung on. He pumped the pedal. The additive began to work. Now they were planing down the concrete, barely touching the surface.

The Zalda dropped behind. A quarter mile, farther, still far-

ther, and then it could no longer be seen.

Red gave a sigh of relief, eased his foot on the pedal. "Beat them out that time. Next time it may not be so easy."

"Who were they?"

"Septics maybe. Maybe renegades. Someone who saw in us a way to turn a quick credit. You find all sorts when you turn over a rock and there have been plenty of rocks overturned."

Now the countryside took on an ochre hue and the dash geiger increased its birdshot rattles. In turn, Red increased his dosage of yellow tablets. They were approaching Omaha; the utter devastation showed itself even in the suburbs that led to the city. But here the highway veered to the south. Somewhere in this vicinity was Central Project--Masterclock. Red began to examine the lanes that fed into the turnpike. From a network of such roads he selected a blacktop that showed signs of heavy travel and turned into it. He drew a blank. He tried another. On the fourth try something told him he had hit the jackpot. The asphalt bored straight as a rule into what had once been fine farm country, emerged on a broad plaisance, set off by a high iron fence, with a gate-tender's house at the near end.

"I think this is it," Red said.

The girl frowned. "I don't see any buildings."

They got out and walked to the gate-house. It was empty but the gate was unlocked and they moved through and down a grass-bordered lane. The entire area lay in cemetery-like silence. Beyond the plaisance stood an ornate fountain. As they circled it an all-white building suddenly sprang into existence before them. Red stared. One instant the space there had been empty; the next there were slate walls, solid and substantial. But then he saw a glimmer of refrac-

tion and knew he had been looking at bent light via massive podaglass --a measure of security.

As if in birth the structure's middle area blossomed from the roof and swept upward like a huge inverted cornucopia. They entered and found themselves in a pastel-walled, mosaic-floored corridor, softly illumined, with many doors opening off either side. The doors bore frosted panels with lettering that read: Office of Time Stabilization, Office of Retro-Calibration, Office of Emigre Patrol, Office of Ancestral and Historical Data. Some of the doors stood open, revealing littered desks, abandoned in haste. At the extreme end of the corridor a Moorish archway bore the overhead legend: "The Citizenry Deserves the Right to Circumnavigate Time and Escape Life's Vicissitudes by Crossing Into the Future."--Senator Barton Bay Quire.

Red led the way through the archway and entered the room beyond.

The room was divided into two sections by a low railing. The near side was richly furnished, carpeted with thick wine-colored pile, with luxurious chairs and divans, framed oil paintings on the walls--a waiting room. In the opposite section was a ceiling-high instrument panel with a bewildering array of gauges and studs mounted upon it. Upraised on a kind of platform was a padded glass-enclosed settee.

"I've got to get Joe!" Red said. "He'll know what to do about this. You stay here, and I'll go phone Joe."

"But there's no reason to . . ."

"There's plenty of reason. I'm going to call Joe."

He turned and ran back the length of the outer corridor to the entrance and made his way across the plaisance to the rattletrap. Two hours of hard fast driving brought him to the next scheduled 'island' where without difficulty he found the marked phone booth.

"Joe? Get back here as fast as you can. We've hit something big."

There was a pause at the other end of the wire. "I won't be able to make it until morning. Where is it?"

"It's tricky to find," Red said. "I'll wait here for you."

Waiting in his keyed-up condition was an ordeal. Red wandered the length and breadth of the town, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. He gazed unseeingly into shop windows and slept on a bench in the park until shortly after dawn Joe came, a short stocky man, with little pinched eyes and a tic at the corner of his mouth. They drove back to Masterclock. Joe's eyes glittered as he looked at the instrument panel in the waiting room.

"I always thought a thing like this was a myth," he said.

"Do you think you can operate it?" Red asked.

"I can operate anything that's operable. I'll need a statilog, prints, a schematic, a corpulae and a lot of other stuff to start with, though."

Red drew from his pocket the vial of yellow tablets; it was almost empty. "Are there any more of these?" he asked Rienza.

The girl shook her head. "I didn't expect you to eat them like candy."

"How long with the immunity last?"

"About three days."

Concern entered Red's face. He turned back to Joe. "Can you . . . in three days . . .?"

The former carny man shrugged. "I can try."

A walk down the corridor took them to the Operations Office. Red left Joe there, shuffling through papers, and went back to Rienza. She had found the commissary and laid out a meal. "Most of the food is contaminated but some of the canned goods is all right. We won't

starve. Joe can eat later, as soon as he finds what he's looking for."

Red ate tinned beans and franks and sweet corn in silence. Through the open door, wafted on the spring breeze, came the smell of moist earth, lush grass and the heady musk of the bottom-lands. There was nothing to indicate that a few miles north or a few miles south the defilement of the land had been total and complete. It was the size and complexity and significance of Masterclock that slowly began to overwhelm him. His own life, up to the present, had been nothing more than a microcosm, penny-ante actions, all aimed at hoisting himself by his bootstraps--his wits--out of the morass of anonymity. The very concept here staggered him.

But a little glow of satisfaction welled through his mind. Joe would figure out a way to operate it. Joe could operate anything. Then there would only remain the necessity of publicizing it. Already he could see long queues of people lined up in the plaisance before the great white building, waiting to pay their fee and embark into the future, to leave this desolation for a place of happiness and peace.

He was still eating when Joe came back from Operations.

"What is this?" Joe demanded. "I never read such gobbledy-gook in my life."

"What do you mean?" Red asked.

"I mean there's nothing here at all. These figures could have been copied out of a schoolboy's physics book."

Red pursed his lips. "Maybe you didn't look far enough."

"It's all this way. Claptrap. Mumbo jumbo."

"You mean there's nothing about time-travel, a way to the future?"

"If there is, it's the craziest thing I ever heard of."

Red scowled in disbelief. "Let's go see."

He led the way into the corridor

to a narrow door that gave access to the space directly behind the instrument panel. The door was locked.

"Open it," Red said.

Without a word Joe drew a multi-bladed knife from his pocket and fitted a probe into the lock. He twisted and after a moment something clicked and the door swung. A second door studded with wires and insulators blocked their way.

"Wait!" Red ran back to the panel room and returned with a length of rubber tubing he remembered seeing there. He motioned Joe to stand back and tossed the tubing at the crossed wires on the door. There was a slight implosion. What appeared to be a dozen laser beams lanced forth. Red shuddered as he thought what might have happened if he had made contact. Joe began his probing anew on the second barrier. And then they were inside.

Across the threshold Red stopped. The enormity of what lay before him held him speechless.

It was like a day in his past when, searching through his grandfather's attic, following the old man's funeral, he had come upon a battered brass-bound trunk. All the wild yarns his grandfather had spun of treasure-hunting off the lonely Dum Dum coast, of incredible riches in unexplored Kalibu, came to a head as his youthful eyes centered on that chest. He remembered the tremor in his hands, the smell of camphor that touched his nostrils as he flung the double-cover back. Then the utter disappointment as he looked down into the trunk's empty interior.

The feeling here was tragically the same. The room contained nothing! No lasitronic equipment, no sensors, no parelitrons, no dji connections . . . nothing! The stubs of the heavy mounting bolts which held the gauges on the other side of the wall were in some places visible. But there were no conduits.

"It's a hoax!" Red said hoarsely. "The whole damned thing is a hoax!"

It was very quiet in the windowless room. The dark unadorned walls seemed to advance and recede before him. A hoax! And yet the full meaning, the significance still did not register in his mind.

Joe came into the room slowly, staring about him like a man suddenly awakened from a drugged sleep. After him came Rienza, eyes wide.

"I can't believe it," Joe said. "All this equipment . . . this building . . . all this expense . . . Why . . .?"

"People do strange things for power and money," the girl said. "Your Senator Quire seems to have been a humbug."

"You!" Red cried, turning on her suddenly. "You knew this! You with all your talk of l'dresidere . . .!"

She looked puzzled. "If you mean I knew this project was a fake, you're wrong. I had no beforehand knowledge at all . . ."

"Your lectures were a pack of lies!"

She shook her head. "L'dresidere is no lie. It's the working rule for everyday life I used to encour-

age the populace. It has nothing to do with Masterclock." She paused. Red could feel perspiration ooze out on the palms of his hands.

"No," she said, "l'dresidere is not Masterclock. L'dresidere is a word culled out of the pages of history, old before the dawn of space-travel, rich in meaning since the stars evolved life. We know its power on my planet and it is the same on Earth."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Red said.

"I think you do. L'dresidere . . . to put it another way . . . a simpler way perhaps . . . The Brotherhood of Man . . ."

Red looked at her unbelievably. "The Brotherhood of Man," he repeated. Not a path to power and riches. Not a shortcut to a golden future. Not a ticket to a Monte Cristo. None of these things. But instead a homespun philosophical concept that he knew, that everyone knew all the time.

He turned and walked out of the room. He went down the corridor and out into the white glare of the sunlit plaisance. Then he burst into mirthless laughter.





I am currently working on a book about Hugo Gernsback and the dawn of magazine science fiction. I am keen to hear from anyone who either had dealings with Gernsback directly (including through letters), or from anyone who knows anyone who did. In this respect I'm most interested in any anecdotes about Gernsback and his dealings with writers. I'm especially interested in knowing what became of any correspondence between Gernsback (or his editors) and HPL or CAS. It was interesting to note in Crypt of Cthulhu that Gernsback's editors were suggesting ideas to CAS and I wonder if those letters survive. I want to establish a true picture of what Gernsback's dealings were like and shake off

any myth that has attached to him. If anyone knows who may now represent the Estates of Gernsback writers like Ray Cummings, Francis Flagg, S. P. Meek and many more, or where their correspondence may now be archived, I would be delighted in hearing from them.

Mike Ashley
Kent, England

"The Eyes of Thar" was fun to read in Astro-Adventures #2. I detect the hand of C. L. Moore in that story, especially the opening scene which reminded me of the Northwest Smith stories.

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